



Beauty of the Beast #2 Daughter Of A King

Chapter One

The Death Sentence Revisited

On Wellspring, Pluck and GuideMa made their way past the encampment in the Valley of Blood and met with the scouting party of the Shadow within the Crimson Grass. The Shadow Necrom spoke to Pluck as if he was very entertained by something, and she froze, knowing she had come to the end of her path. "You have returned to me. I am very pleased," Malus shouted. "Now, I want you to surrender to me." Pluck glanced at GuideMa still in fear for the Femor's life and prayed she would remain safe, and then she inquired, "What will you do to the Witness?" Malus said, "If you are so concerned with her, you should not have brought her along." "This Witness has a mind of her own and I couldn't deter her," Pluck replied, and then she pleaded, "Please spare her life. A Witness is only a witness if they remain alive." "I will consider your request," Malus told her. "Now come and surrender to me." Her heart pounded in her chest as if it would be the death of her, and Pluck didn't know if her feet would obey her, and then she thought of the one before her and what he might do to GuideMa if she didn't immediately obey, so Pluck moved forward towards her end. "What is the proper way for me to surrender to you?" Pluck questioned as she continued walking forward and GuideMa stayed behind. "I was never taught such etiquette." "Kneel before me, and I will take your head," Malus told her. Pluck had decided not to think of what matter of death the Shadow Necrom would bring against her. She didn't want to focus on her end, she wanted to focus on her friends, her mother, and Votar. So when Malus spoke that a blade would topple her head and end her existence, her whole being went ashen and caused her to pause. She didn't want to die. She wanted to spend a lifetime with Votar. She wanted to be Duchess of Shangra and protect its people and make sure their lives were as happy as she could make them, but all of those wants were wishes, and she had so little time left. Pluck placed her mind with her heart and focused her thoughts on Votar and all those she had saved. The other Shadow people moved all around her and drew their weapons as if they would take part in her death. Pluck looked to each one, and their faces were mad with carnage. She didn't want those hate-filled faces to be the last thing she saw, so she lifted the white rose she carried all this way with her, engraved its image in her mind, and took once more of its scent. The rose was her promise to Votar that she would always love him and not even death could change that. Pluck walked a few more paces, placed the rose to her chest, knelt before Malus, bowed her head and closed her eyes, and waited for her end. Malus drew his long dagger, and the blade glowed with Maag-neg as he lifted it high, and the others of the Shadow began to crowd around the False One as if their fangs were ready to devour her. Pluck had never been more afraid in her whole life. Her eyes were closed but she could feel their hatred of her and their desire to kill her. She gripped the stem of the thornless rose but not so hard as to smash it. Pluck seized it as she seized her love and friendship for the others. They were safely away and she had saved them; Pluck had to focus on this or she would move and try to save herself. GuideMa stood her ground and became a spectator to an execution, and she watched in horror as the Shadow crowded all around the vile selfless Woman. It panged her heart to see such a thing, and tears began to flow down her cheeks. She took one step towards Pluck as if she would run to her rescue, but she knew she was powerless to do anything. GuideMa stood there as she had come,

she stood there and bore witness to what would come. She hated herself at that moment. She hated that she loved Duke Gamemnon so much that she would do anything for him, even stand idly by as monsters killed someone who would have been the perfect Servatrix. "I now take your life," Malus told Pluck and then swiped his long dagger across her neck. Pluck felt something strike her body and it seemed to pull something from her and she wondered if that was the point of death. Her whole body tingled so she opened her eyes and saw the ground and her hand that held the white rose. She looked up and Malus stared down at her with a look that made her very afraid. "Can we eat of her now?" Loathen questioned. The Shadow Velum carried a small double-bladed ax Pluck thought she recognized. "No," Malus answered him. "We always divide the spoils," Zephen spoke as he fluttered above the others, casting them in a sickly green glow. Malus turned to Abhora, and he questioned, "Should we take her back to our camp?" "We should," Abhora replied. "The Cave of Warning isn't that far away from there." Malus asked the Shadow Femor, "Can you keep Lord Caliber under control? He and those with him will want to destroy my prize and I have just acquired her." "The Man and those with him will do my bidding or their defiance will be their end," Abhora answered. "We still don't know if you have the prize." "No matter, I at least have a plaything," Malus told her. "What if she is the one spoken by our prophecies?" Abhora questioned him. "Can you lead her to the way of Shadow? If we can acquire the False One..." Malus interrupted her, "Maybe we should speak of this once we have returned to our camp and not in front of certain ears." "You don't want your plaything to know what you have in store for her. I can understand that. Surprise can be a stimulant in itself," Abhora spoke. "I'll return ahead of you and prepare for our journey of discovery," the Shadow Femor told him, stepped back from their circle, spoke some words of Maag-neg, and a whirlwind of black smoke whisked her away. Loathen gripped his battle ax as he spoke, "Let us bound her and the Witness' hands and return to our camp." "I believe there is no need to bind the hands of the False One or the Witness," Malus spoke. "They have come this far unrestricted so they can go the rest of the way the same. Walk with me False One. I have much that I want to tell you and there's much that I want to know." "What is going on?" Pluck asked the Shadow Necrom. "I thought..." "I would kill you," Malus interrupted her. "I have better things in mind for you. Now come." Pluck stood as she yelled, "I'm going nowhere with you. You said you were going to kill me and that was our deal." "You want death so badly you would complain that you're still alive?" Malus questioned her. "Our bargain is as I said it was. Your life for those in the encampment." He pointed at her with his dagger as he asked, "Do you not notice something different about your neck?" She put a hand to her neck and felt some sort of choker there, and she asked, "What is this?" "I took your life, and now it belongs to me. You are now bound to me by that Gold Choker of Fettering." "I don't understand." "I took your life with the Constraining Dagger," Malus told her as he showed her the gold dagger with the curved blade. "Your life is now mine. Stay within a hundred hands of me within the perimeter and you will feel no different," he started to explain. "Go beyond the hundred hands of the perimeter and every step your life will start to leave you. They say the experience is unsettling at first and does not really hurt but the farther you are from me the more your life leaves you. Don't believe me? Stay where you are and you will feel that I'm telling you the truth." Malus took a step away from her and told the remaining Shadow people, "We return. Mar, you will take up the rear." The Shadow Dreadgon nodded, and Malus headed off followed by the Shadow Velum and the Shadow KellyZing. A few mites later, GuideMa approached the Woman after all but the Shadow Dreadgon had left. "You never expected to live, did you?" "My

continued existence must also be a shock to you," Pluck told her as she rubbed the choker around her own neck. "What will you do? If the Shadow Necrom spoke the truth, you can't run away from him," GuideMa told her. "I did give him my life, though I believe I was tricked into it," Pluck replied as she started to feel the effects Malus had mentioned. Pluck felt lightheaded and out of sync with her whole body, so she turned and walked after Malus in a hurried pace till the weird sensation left her and then she walked in a normal pace. GuideMa and the Shadow Dreadgon followed after her. She quickly caught up to the Woman. "What are you doing?" Pluck questioned her. "You should run away when you get the opportunity." "I'm the Witness," GuideMa told her. "I'm here with you until your end." "It's not my end that I'm worried about," Pluck told her. Malus slowed his pace so that his new prize could catch up to him and he walked on the other side of Pluck as he questioned, "Do you believe me now?" "I never doubted you," Pluck answered. "Are you saying you trust me?" "You haven't given me reason to doubt you. Trust though..." she began. "Trust's not easily given and can be taken away in the flutter of a humming bird's wing." "You are as wise as you are beautiful," he told her. "Beauty fades or can be taken away. Will your wisdom hold to you?" They walked on through the Crimson Grass and startled a herd of Field Giraffes. Pluck questioned him, "You keep staring at me." "I do," he said. "Why do you keep staring at me?" "Why do you need to know?" "It's making me uncomfortable," Pluck answered him. "Do you believe by knowing the reason I stare at you will make you any more comfortable?" She thought about it, and then she admitted, "Considering the possible answers, it would probably have the opposite effect." "I stare because I can't believe I have you. Death and distance had parted us and now I have you." "You talk as if we have met before." He laughed and then he said, "We have. I met you the sun's cycle I became alive for the very first time, and I also met you the sun's cycle my life came to a very bitter-sweet end." Pluck told him, "You talk in riddles." "Is there any other way to talk if one wishes the other to remain in the dark a little longer?" he inquired. She peered at him and didn't answer him. Pluck had lost her fear of death, not the fear of dying but that she wouldn't die right away. Malus and Abhora had some sort of plan for her, and Pluck believed they needed her alive a little longer for whatever it was. She glanced at GuideMa. Pluck had to convince her somehow to leave if she ever got to chance to flee. Pluck glanced at the white rose and her thoughts returned to Votar and the pain he must be waking to.

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Later that sun's cycle...

Shangra the Great City...

Votar's Estate...

Kabal stared down at her brother as he started to stir. Votar had slept longer than she expected, and Kabal worried she may have given him too large a dose of sleeping liquid. He opened his feral citron eyes and she smiled at him. "You're finally awake," Kabal said as she stood from sitting beside him on his bed. Votar sat up and held his head as he questioned, "Where am I?" He looked around and spoke, "Are we back in Shangra?" "Yes, for a few nals now," she answered him. "Where's Pluck?" "She's..." "I sent her to Glevon," Nirva interrupted Kabal. Votar inquired, "Why did you send her there?" "I heard it's one of the places that houses the Serviatrix

Prophecy," Nirva replied. Kabal had informed the Advisor of the sacrifice Pluck committed to save everyone in the Valley of Blood, and what Kabal did to her own brother to ensure Pluck left without him trying to stop her. "When should she be back?" Votar inquired. "We have a wedding to plan." Nirva replied, "Glevon is a sun's cycle journey by beast each way so she should return in three." Votar tried to stand and then he fell back to the bed, and he asked, "What happened to me?" "Too much wine," Kabal told him. "I don't imagine you impressed your betrothed." "Will you ever lose your hatred of Pluck?" he questioned his sister. "I already have," she admitted as she petted both the male Calico Winsome Kit and Fulgor. The female Calico Winsome Kit stayed with Fairah. Kabal said, "Pluck has at least earned my respect." "Nirva, I want to announce my betrothal to Pluck and I wish to do it now." "I can't allow that," the Advisor spoke. "Why is that?" Votar demanded. "One, you are in no condition to speak to any in a standing position and two, it would be better if Pluck was by your side when you make the announcement." "You're right," Votar told him. "I'm just very anxious about something." Kabal spoke, "You did just commit a lifetime to someone and part of your dukedom. What is there to be anxious about?" "What of the army of Cursed and Shadow?" "The larger army disbanded into smaller units and scattered all over Wellspring," Nirva replied. "I believe they won't attack in such large numbers as was reported in the Valley of Blood in the immediate future." Cordon, Captain of the Shangra Guards, walked in, bowed to his Duke, and said, "Duke Gamemnon and Tabitha are here to see you." "I don't know if I have the patience for my old friend right now," Votar said. "Why is he here?" "He wouldn't tell me," Cordon replied. "Should I send him away?" "No, I will meet with the two of them." Votar, Kabal, and Nirva sat at a long table while Cordon and a few Shangra Guards stood around the room. Gamemnon and Tabitha sat across from them. Her Roth bodyguard and a few Torlawn Guards stood behind them. Votar and Kabal glared at Gamemnon as he returned their stares. "You wish to speak with me," Votar spoke up. Gamemnon glanced around the room, and then he said, "I'm here to assist Tabitha in retrieving something that belongs to her." Votar asked, "What might that be?" "Alba," Tabitha replied. "Where is she? She was supposed to return to me." "Who is this Alba?" Votar questioned. Kabal told him, "It is Pluck's Servir name." Votar leaned to Nirva who sat next to him at the table and whispered something to him. Nirva pushed back his chair and excused himself and left. "Where is Alba?" Tabitha repeated her question. "Pluck isn't here," Votar told her. "You can't hide her from us," Gamemnon informed him. "Give her back to her mistress." Nirva returned and shook his head at the Duke of Shangra, and then he returned to his seat. Gamemnon noticed and he questioned, "What did your Advisor go check on? Did he see if Tabitha's servir was safely tucked away?" "Pluck isn't here," Votar repeated. "She must be," Gamemnon insisted. "My guards tell me that the Shadow and Cursed never attacked the encampment in the new existence. I would still like to know how such an extraordinary feat was created to turn back part of a sun's cycle." He peered at the Duke of Shangra, and then he snapped, "Tell me where the Woman is or I and my guards will tear apart your city until we find her." Kabal stood as she slammed her palms on the table and shouted, "You both are like cubs fighting over a ball! The vile Woman isn't here! She went off to Glevon looking for some prophecy there. If you want her so badly, go after her!" Kabal regained her composure and sat back down as she said in a calmer voice, "You should know that my brother plans to wed the Woman." Tabitha uttered, "My Alba will become a Duchess?" She turned to the Duke of Torlawn and inquired of him, "Can a servir become a Duchess?" "I imagine Nirva can answer that question for us," Gamemnon stated, and then he addressed his friend as he

questioned, "You sent your Advisor to look into the matter." Votar remained silent as he glared at his friend. "I had a few of my assistants look into the matter once I had heard of my Duke's desire and what had happened to Pluck," Nirva spoke up, and then he said, "I went to get a progress report from them. The Servir Oath was banned by our King's father so none of my assistants were able to find anyone who knew where I could research the matter. I have no answer." "Keep looking," Gamemnon said. "I don't imagine you'll find the answer you're hoping for." He rose from his seat and said, "Come, Tabitha, I will have my old friend provide us food and lodging until the vile Woman returns from Glevon. I can show you around Shangra while we wait. I also heard your father will arrive sometime in the next sun's cycle or two." Gamemnon left with all who came with him. Votar slammed his fist on the table and then snapped at his sister, "Why did you tell him all of that? You and Nirva speak too much." "You think with your heart too much," Kabal snapped back at him. "We have peeked Gamemnon's curiosity. He may find the answer we seek." Gamemnon and Tabitha went to the lodging Votar provided for them. Tabitha went in as her bodyguard followed, and she said, "I'll rest for about a nal and then I will continue my search for Alba." "Do you really believe that Woman is in Shangra?" Gamemnon questioned her. "No, but I believe I can find clues as to where she could be or at least keep my mind busy," Tabitha replied. "I'm uneasy." Gamemnon walked up behind her and said, "Ease your mind. I imagine the vile Woman is dead and that would make you the Serviatrix without question." "Does it?" she inquired as she turned and faced him. "I fled the encampment instead of helping those I'm supposed to protect." "Everyone made it out of the Valley of Blood," he told her. "You even sent the Woman to face the Shadow. You acted, you just had someone else act in your place." "No, that isn't true," she spoke. "Alba would have stayed if I ordered her or not. She acted. Foolishly, but she acted with her heart." "Forget about her. If you want servants, I'll provide you with servants, but first... I have a gift for you. One I was going to give you while we were in the Valley of Blood." He lifted his voice and said, "Bring it to me." A servant came in with a box and Gamemnon took it from the female Necrom and then she left. He presented the box to Tabitha and she took it and opened it. She stated, "It's a medallion bearing half the insignia of the Necrom Kingdom and half of the insignia of the Roth Kingdom. This was made from the two medallions you showed me while we were in the encampment." "It was," he replied. Tabitha touched it and said, "Part of Alba is on this." "I guess you could say that," Gamemnon spoke. "Does it have any meaning?" "It does," he replied. "I told you before that it's a symbol of unity. You are the key to bringing these two rival kingdoms together." She grabbed the chain of the medallion and placed it over her head as she said, "Thank you. I will wear it always. Now I will rest and then go explore this grand city." "I did offer to show you around," he told her. "I would like to go on my own," she stated, then glanced at Groth, and added, "On my own as anyone with a bodyguard in tow can be. It will also keep my mind occupied until we have learned what has happened to Alba." "I will rest here until your return, but we will not be staying in Shangra for long. I have discovered another location for one of the Serviatrix's prophecies. I am making preparations and we won't leave until King Solom arrives. Your father will want to go with us." Tabitha admitted, "It did sadden me to see him depart from us and head for Caldron. I'll be very happy when he returns to me."

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Far from Wellspring...

Aboard the Seahorn...

Edward's cabin...

"Edward," Ardor shouted through the door after he had knocked at it. "We have found another dead sailor. He is the one who grabbed Adroit, and my lord, one of his arms is missing." "Enter," Edward bided him. The Grand Commander came in, and then Edward questioned him, "I take it by your shouting that the whole ship knows." "They do, my lord. They also know that the sailor has been dead less than a nal." Edward turned to his wife and said, "See to your... See to our daughter." Virago nodded and rushed to return to her cabin. Ardor waited till she left, and then he said, "Everyone believes the Shadow child did this. I do not know how long the creature shall remain safe under your wife's protection." "Our protection," Edward stated. "Make sure the whole ship knows it is our protection." "Yes, my lord." "Take me to the body," Edward commanded.

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Virago rushed to her cabin and then inquired of the men guarding it, "Have any entered or left?" "None except you, my Empress," one replied. She opened the door and entered, finding Lady Flaxen and Adroit sound asleep. Virago didn't want to, but she woke the child. "Mother..?" Adroit questioned her still a little groggy. Her heart melted when she heard the child speak her new position, and she wrapped her arms around her and hugged her. "This is very important," Virago told her as she embraced her. "I need to know if you left the cabin." "I haven't," Adroit answered. Virago glanced around the windowless room, and then she said, "I need only know one other thing. Can you turn invisible like the other Shadow we encounter?" "No," Adroit replied. "My Maag-neg is very weak. I only have my natural abilities." Virago pulled from her, then placed her hand to her scaled cheek, and said, "Something has happened. The crew found another sailor dead and his arm has been ripped off." Adroit immediately understood the significance of this, and she asked, "Everyone thinks I did this?" "I fear that the crew does, but I, your father, and Lady Flaxen believe in you." "I didn't rip off another sailor's arm," Adroit replied. "I believe you," Virago told her. "Maybe whoever killed the first sailor also killed this one and took his arm," Adroit suggested. Lady Flaxen woke, sat up in bed, and said, "What has happened?" "Another has been slain," Virago answered her, and then she asked the child, "Do you know if there is another Shadow aboard?" "I don't sense any," Adroit said. "We are so far away from my people now. I don't sense any of them. I haven't for several sun's cycles."

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Edward entered the cargo hold with Ardor and looked over the body of the sailor by lantern light. "Tell me what you see as you examine the corpse," Edward commanded. Ardor bent and spoke, "He was killed with a knife and the wound around his shoulder... It was cut off with something sharp. The first sailor... his arm had been torn off." "Do you believe someone could have done this to make it look like Adroit had committed this crime?" "I believe that is a possibility, my lord," Ardor replied. "If this is true, we have a murder among the crew." "I need to meet with the captain. Have Fracas and Vim guard over the body. None are to enter this area." "At once, my lord."

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Edward's cabin...

"You wanted to see me, my lord?" the ship's captain questioned as he entered his own cabin. "I did. Please have a seat. I wanted to talk to you about the sailor who was just found murdered," Edward replied. "What do you know about him?" The captain sat as he answered, "He stayed out of trouble until that one incident where he got drunk aboard ship and discovered the child was really a monster." "I shall not take offense this time," Edward told him. "But if you should say anything like that about my daughter again..." "Please, forgive me, my lord." Edward commanded, "Tell me more about the sailor." "He was originally from Hort, one of two men on my crew who was born on that foreign island." "What about his loyalty to Fletching?" "It is not uncommon for sailors to be brought on board from foreign lands. He took the oath and swore allegiance to Fletching. I would say most spies claim to be native born, but still, I have sailed with him many seasons and would stake my life on him." "What of this other sailor who you mentioned was from Hort? Did the two of them know each other?" "I believe they were friends," the captain replied. "Funny thing is... The sailor who was first killed is that other man." "That is interesting," Edward stated. "The only two men who were from Hort have been killed. I do not think an assassin could be so particular. Tell me about this other sailor." "Now he... A very good sailor but his morals... He liked to gamble which is not a crime, but the way he acquired his money. I had no proof so I never sacked him, but I heard he liked to blackmail people." "So we have one sailor who was known for extortion and a sailor that was a friend of his. Maybe these murders have nothing to do with my daughter, but with another problem that we brought on board." Edward stood and started to leave the cabin, then turned to the captain, and said, "If you should ever tell anyone that I called my daughter a problem that was brought on board, I shall have you flogged to death." "I never heard a thing," the captain said. "I am still getting used to the idea that a creature is my daughter, so my lips shall slip and that was why I did not take offense the first time you spoke in such a manner. I do not have the love my wife has for this creature, but I shall still protect Adroit with my might until my heart embraces her fully and I want to protect her with my whole being." "I have never heard something more beautiful. If I was not a man, I would cry," the captain told him. Edward said, "If you tell anyone I said such a thing, I shall also have you flogged." "No threat needed, my lord. I shall keep what I have heard buried in my own heart."

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The priests' cabin...

High Priest Sagax returned and found the other two asleep. Priest Fallac sat up and rubbed his eyes as he questioned, "Where have you been? I heard someone had been killed and feared..." Monk Sophis also stirred. "I believe I have made a grave mistake," Sagax spoke. "I let my emotions interfere with sound judgment and another has died." Sophis spoke, "The assassin has struck again?" The high priest peered at the men, and then he said, "Another murder has been committed." "It must be that Shadow creature they brought on board," Sophis spoke. "I doubt the protection that comes from the Empress shall save it now." "A Child of Shadow..." the high priest spoke to himself. "I must speak with the Emperor." Priest Fallac questioned him, "Why

do you want to speak to him?" "There is a prophecy passed down through the line of High Priest that speaks of a Child of Shadow. I need to tell the Emperor of this." "We shall go with you," Priest Fallac spoke. "As you wish," Sagax replied.

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Virago and Flaxen's cabin...

The Empress decided that neither she nor the lady should leave the cabin and had a guard bring them their breakfast. Lady Flaxen cut up an Emerald Pear as Adroit watched with interest. The ship rocked in the choppy seas, and Flaxen cut her finger with the knife. "You are hurt," Adroit told her as she peered at the wound as the lady wrapped it in a clean hand towel. "I am fine. It is only a small cut. See..." Flaxen told the child and she showed her the tiny wound. Adroit reached out her little finger and touched the blood and then put her finger to her mouth as she said, "It tastes clean. Your wound should heal nicely." "My daughter..." Virago spoke. "Yes, mother," Adroit said as she turned to her. "Those who you called the Shadow. Their ways are not our ways. You can no longer eat anything that is of any of the races." "I..." Adroit began, ashamed of her actions. "I didn't do so to eat or treat myself like with the strawberries. I... I believe I did this not as a Shadow but as my people would have. I meant Flaxen no harm. I only wanted to make sure she would be fine." Virago said, "You told me you know little about your people." "I spoke true," Adroit told her. "I don't know my people's race but these feelings come over me ever so often. The Shadow also said that I should let things that are forgotten and unlearned remain that way." The child peered up at her mother and questioned, "Should I continued to do so?" Virago glanced at the lady, and then she told her daughter, "I do not know. I do not want you to be as the Shadow, but I do not want you to forsake the race you were born of." She turned to the lady and questioned, "What do you think?" "I think we can take it sun's cycle by sun's cycle," Flaxen replied. "So Adroit, it is fine for you to be concerned with my cut. It proves you care about me and that you find me of importance." Adroit smiled and then went back to playing with her wooden toys on the bed. Virago watched her daughter as her love for her grew with each passing nal. The murder of the second sailor bothered her, and she feared for the safety of them all.

Chapter Two

Shadows Of The Past Existence

The whole journey Malus eyed Pluck in a way that made her uncomfortable, not that the stares from the other Shadows were any less unsettling. He stared at her as if he knew her. Pluck and GuideMa along with Malus, Mar, Loathen, and Zephen left the Valley of Blood and entered an area called Vansome and shortly after that, they entered the Shadow's camp. "My tent is just there," Malus pointed out, and then he commanded Pluck, "Go in and wait for me." Pluck said nothing and went into the tent along with GuideMa. Malus waited a few moments, and then he commanded, "Mar and Zephen, go and get some rest. We go on a long journey tomorrow." The Shadow Dreadgon and the Shadow KellyZing did as commanded. "I take it you wish to speak with

me," Loathen said. "I do," Malus told the Shadow Velum. "I get a sense from you that I don't from the others. They all want to kill the False One, but you, you have a strong desire to do so." "I mean to kill the False One," Loathen told him. "She stabbed me in the back while I was attacking an Egle." "The wound is no more," Malus told him. "The existence the attack happened in is no more." "The wound might not be there, but the memory of it is still rotting in my mind," Loathen told him. "I mean to kill her." "Know what you do," Malus threatened him. "Her life is mine." "Abhora and the others might be too afraid of you to act on their impulse, but I'm not," Loathen stated. "Tell Abhora of our return," Malus ordered him. The Shadow Velum moved off. Malus watched Loathen leave as he muttered to himself, "Pluck might have wounded you, but she killed me in the original existence." He turned and looked at his own tent and muttered, "If you are going to kill the False One for wounding you, what should I do to Pluck for killing me?" Pluck and GuideMa entered the Shadow Necrom's tent to find a large area with a bed in the middle that was set within a living tree. The tree was the center post of the tent and lifted only twenty feet into the air. Its roots made up the frame of the bed. "Now would be a good opportunity to run," Pluck told the Femor while they were alone. "You could easily slip out of the tent and..." GuideMa turned to her, crossed her arms, and glared at her. "You're not going anywhere, are you?" Pluck questioned as she sighed. "I can't protect you here." "I never asked you to." "I'm afraid for you," Pluck said. "Worry about your own life," GuideMa told her. "It doesn't belong to me anymore," Pluck stated. "So I will worry about you and do what I can to keep you safe." The Shadow Necrom entered his large tent, and he spoke, "I'm still surprised that you returned to me and you still have the two items of Maag-lee with you. Show them to me." "You may own my life, but I belong to another and I only do her bidding," Pluck told him as she showed him her servitor mark. "Knowing this, will you force me to do your bidding?" He peered at her with the look of familiarity, and then Malus questioned her as he pointed to the Femor, "What if I threaten her life?" Pluck turned to GuideMa and whispered, "You should have never come with me." Pluck told Malus, "You understand my weakness all too well." "You did give me your life for the sake of your friends," he said. "Your kind always has weaknesses we can exploit." She glanced at the dagger he had used on her, and Pluck questioned, "Do you wield magic? Is that how you took my life?" "I don't wield Maag-neg," Malus replied as he showed her his long dagger, and then he stated, "My weapon is magic as is the robe that covers me. The robe is magic and it is me." Malus then questioned, "Did you bring up my power to distract me?" "I did," Pluck told him. "I don't wish to show you my items of Maag-lee. Will you really hurt GuideMa if I don't?" "I..." he started to answer, and then another Shadow Necrom entered the tent, and Malus asked of him angrily, "What is it?" "A matter is in need of your attention?" the Shadow Necrom replied. Malus glanced at Pluck, and then he told the Shadow Necrom, "I come." Malus told Pluck, "Stay in my tent if you wish to remain alive." He left with the Shadow Necrom, and GuideMa questioned her, "Do you think he is going very far?" Pluck touched the gold choker around her neck and said, "I will know soon enough." A few mites went by, and Loathen entered Malus' tent along with Zephen and Mar. "Where is Malus?" Loathen demanded. GuideMa replied, "He left with another Shadow Necrom." Loathen ordered Pluck, "Come with us." "Malus told me to stay here," she told the Shadow Velum. Loathen threatened, "Come with us or I will have Mar boil the Witness and we will feast upon her tonight." Pluck glanced at GuideMa, and then she said, "Lead the way." Loathen started out of the tent and then he told the other two Shadows, "Have the Witness also come. She may prove to be handy again." The Shadow camp

was situated in the Woods of Spry within Vansome, and Loathen led Pluck and GuideMa through dense trees. The choker around Pluck's neck started to tighten and made it hard for her to breathe. GuideMa noticed the difficulty she was having but said nothing. Pluck paused as she leaned on a tree, and then she asked with a bit of difficulty, "Do you mean to kill me?" "I do," Loathen told her. "Here will be the place." Pluck positioned herself so that she was standing in front of GuideMa and the three Shadows were standing in front of her. "Why did you wait till now to kill me?" Pluck inquired as her throat felt as if it would completely seal up on her. "If Malus wanted me dead, he could have taken my life in the Crimson Grass." "I know nothing of Malus' mind," Loathen began. "I only know I want to kill you, and as a Shadow, I take what I want." "Wound her," Loathen ordered Zephen. The Shadow KellyZing was armed with a bow, and he drew back the string of his weapon and released. A small light left his bow, but then it grew into a large arrow as it sped toward Pluck. "Lux, shield!" Pluck ordered, and the shield of her gauntlet extended and absorbed the energy of the arrow. Mar said, "The False One does have a weapon of Maag-Ilee." Pluck collapsed to her knees as she turned to GuideMa and said, "Run! Run before..." Pluck fell to the dirt as she slowly suffocated. GuideMa started towards her, but then turned and ran into the woods. Loathen lifted his ax as he neared Pluck. "I will have this False One's head," Loathen declared. Pluck slipped into unconsciousness as everything went black but before she fainted she heard an angry roar.

Earlier within the Shadow's camp...

Malus finished speaking with the other Shadow Necrom when his Maag-neg weapon called Constraining Dagger informed him that Pluck had walked out of the perimeter, and he grinned as he muttered, "I thought she would wait a little longer before she would test the reach of my choker." He experienced her discomfort as Pluck experienced the growing discomfort of the Gold Choker of Fettering, and Malus told his dagger, "She is a little more stubborn than I expected, but she should turn around shortly. No one can escape our hold." Malus experienced her suffering as it increased, and he also found it hard to breathe, so he released the sharing part of the bound and tracked her. As long as Pluck wore the choker, he knew where she was. He entered the Woods of Spry and followed a path to a clearing where he saw Loathen, Mar, and Zephen facing Pluck and the Witness. He watched as Zephen fired at Pluck and observed her defend herself with some sort of shield. Malus was very upset but he felt some new sensation as he saw Pluck collapsed to the ground and Loathen make his way towards her ready to use his ax on her. Malus roared and the three Shadows turned to him as he raced for them and his black ragged robe fluttered about him, mirroring his rage. "You took what is mine," Malus accused the Shadow Velum. Loathen glanced at Pluck as GuideMa returned and hid behind a tree. "I don't see your mark anywhere on her," Loathen said as he faced the angry Shadow Necrom. "We are Shadow. We take what we want, we rape what we want, and we eat what we want. If you made some claim on her, you should have marked her. The choker that binds the False One does not mark her. She's mine as much as she's yours." "Do you wish to challenge me for the right of claim?" Malus questioned him as he drew his long dagger. Mar and Zephen moved away from the Shadow Velum in case a fight did ensue. Loathen glanced once more at Pluck and then he said, "She killed me. I have a right to take my revenge." Malus told him, "I have no less of a right to her. Let us settle this now. Declare the right to claim or leave." "Take her and mark her," Loathen told him. "I will lay claim to her if you don't." The Shadow Velum marched off, and Mar and

Zephen followed him. GuideMa came out of hiding as Malus rushed over to Pluck and knelt to her. "How is she?" GuideMa questioned. "She isn't breathing," Malus replied, then he reached his hand behind her neck, lifted her head off of the ground, took a deep breath, placed his mouth over hers, and blew into her lungs. GuideMa put a hand to her own mouth appalled by the sight. She wasn't sure what made her react in this way, but seeing a Shadow do such a thing to Pluck made her feel ill. Malus took another deep breath and blew into Pluck's mouth again. Sparkles engulfed her whole body and Pluck's form reverted to her true form, and a Woman lay before the Shadow Necrom. Malus pulled back his head as he took another deep breath and he saw the new form. "What is this creature?" he demanded. GuideMa gasped, and then she answered, "This must be her true form. She is of Man." Pluck's mane was no more and brown hair had replaced it. He ran his fingers through the strands and said, "This creature repulses me for some reason, but isn't she beautiful?" The Femor peered at Pluck, and then she said, "This vile creature is beautiful. Is she alive?" Malus turned his head, placed his ear on her chest, and then replied, "She breathes. She is alive for now." He removed his dark ragged robe, revealing he wore black pants and a vest underneath, then he wrapped the robe around Pluck, lifted her into his arms, and said, "Come, we'll return to my tent unless the Witness chooses to run again." "I ran, but I came back," GuideMa spoke, noticed the white rose on the ground that Pluck had been holding, and picked it up. She followed after the Shadow Necrom and questioned him, "Why did you wrap your robe around her? It is not cold here." "The robe is me, so I am touching her and she will recover more quickly. The Gold Choker of Fettering released her the moment I stepped back into its perimeter, but it doesn't let the wearer off so easily." Sparkles once again engulfed Pluck and she returned to her beastly form.

Mites later...

Pluck blinked opened her eyes and saw that she was in Malus' arms and that he was carrying her. A dark substance surrounded her but it didn't make her afraid like the mirky cloud that had attacked her. She felt safe as if she was in a cocoon. "You can put me down," Pluck told him. "I will carry you to the tent. Rest," Malus told her. "You're still weak from your ordeal." Malus decided not to take Pluck directly to his tent but went to Abhora's tent instead. Lord Caliber stood outside of Abhora's tent as they approached, and Pluck tried to climb her way out of Malus hold. "Do you intend to hand me over to another of my enemies?" Pluck asked. "No," Malus replied. "The Man knows to harm you means his own death." Lord Caliber glared at her, and Pluck immediately noticed how different he looked. Lord Caliber walked to where Avarice and the other Morgogs were and she saw that they all looked different like they had embraced the way of Shadow. "You do not look too happy," Avarice spoke to Lord Caliber. "Not that any of us have looked happy since we fled MayPah Beach. You though... You seemed to at least be enjoying yourself. What has changed?" "The arrival of the Beast Woman," Lord Caliber replied. "Abhora has informed me we may not harm this False One for now. They have plans for her." Avarice said, "We should make our own plans for her."

Abhora's tent...

Malus carried Pluck in and set her on Abhora's bed, and Pluck tried to move, but her body felt weighted down. "Have you broken your plaything already?" Abhora questioned him. "Nearly," he replied. "I was careless. How damaged is she?" Abhora stretched out all four of her hands and

waved them over Pluck as GuideMa entered the tent. "She, for the most part, is unharmed. I do sense some sort of curse upon her and that curse was lifted but only for a short while." "I did see her true form," Malus replied. "She was a horror to behold." "I'll also lift the veil so that I may take a peek," Abhora said. He grabbed one of her wrists and said, "I would not do that. I'm still trembling from what I saw." Abhora peered at Pluck and then she said, "I do not need to see right now." Malus said, "I need for you to perform a taboo upon her." "What do you want me to do?" "I want you to heal her slight injuries. I wish for us to travel tomorrow and I don't wish to carry her." Abhora told him, "You will owe me a favor for breaking this taboo." "A favor will be owed," Malus replied. Abhora healed Pluck, and Malus took her back to his tent.

Malus' tent...

Pluck walked on her own back to his tent, and GuideMa handed her the white rose, and Pluck thanked her for retrieving it. Pluck entered the tent where she thought she would be allowed to sit down but Malus grabbed her arm so that she would turn to him. "You shouldn't have gone with Loathen. He still means to kill you." Pluck yelled back at him as she pulled away from his hold, "I don't believe I had a choice or have you forgotten that I'm a prisoner here?" "I saw you use one of your items of Maag-Ilee to defend yourself. Show it and the other item to me." "Are you going to threaten GuideMa again to get what you want?" Pluck questioned him. "I told you before that you did give me your life for the sake of your friends," he said. "I'll always exploit your weaknesses. It's the Shadow way." "I'll tell you again that I don't wish to show you my items of Maag-Ilee. And I'll ask you again if you'll really hurt GuideMa if I don't?" Malus turned to the Femor and told her, "I would speak with this False One alone." "How can I be a Witness if I can't be a witness?" GuideMa inquired of him. "Do so, but don't make a nuisance of yourself or a dead witness you will be," Malus threatened her. He turned and reached out his hand for Pluck as he said, "Come sit with me on my bench." She glanced at his outstretched hand, then moved around him, and went and sat on the bench. He grinned at her defiance and/or shyness and then went and sat beside her. "Do you know why I took your life instead of killing you?" She shook her head. "There are two very important reasons and the second is the most important. I didn't kill you because you claimed to be the False One and you have a witness who isn't your ally," Malus told her as he reached out his hand and tenderly took hers. "You bear the mark..." Pluck jerked her hand out of his grasp a little overwhelmed by his attention to her and the care he seemed to take with her. Malus carefully retook her hand and repeated, "You bear the mark of both the Necrom Kingdom and the Roth Kingdom." He smoothed his rough fingers over her servir mark, and she felt even more uncomfortable. "And you faced us in combat with such fearlessness." "We never fought," Pluck said. "Our blades never met." "Blades?" he repeated as he peered at the gauntlet on her other hand. "I believe you have revealed that your shield is more than a shield." Pluck pulled her hand from his and stood and retreated from him as if she would flee the tent. Malus stood and took only one step towards her as he said, "Those things I mentioned are the first reason. I'll now tell you of the second. Do you know that we have met before?" He interrupted her before she had a chance to answer, "I'm not referring to when you came upon my scouting party at the edge of the Valley of Blood. I'm talking about in the encampment." Pluck said, "I don't remember coming across you. Wait... do you mean when the Shadow and Cursed attacked the encampment? I never saw any of the faces of the Shadow I fought. You were there?" "I was one of the ones who surrounded the seven Egles you tried to rescue from our

advancing army," Malus replied as he took another step towards her, gripping the hilt of his sheathed dagger as he thought of how viciously she had killed him. "I first spotted you when one of the Cursed swallowed you whole in one of their poisonous mists. I thought nothing of you then, not until you leapt out of the dark cloud with no harm to your body or clothes. I watched you with growing curiosity as you searched the camp, not for an escape but a weapon. You seized a spear from the ground and went to the first being you saw in trouble. You attacked Loathen in the back. I should tell you that he desperately wants to kill you now. I would take extra care with him. You attacked Loathen in the back and then rushed into the center of us, turned, and faced us. I laughed to myself and wished to take you as one of my spoils of war. I continued watching you, and the more you fought, the more I knew I must have you. A Shadow Dreadgon moved to kill you, and I thought about killing him just to keep my spoil unspoiled, that is until I had my fill of you. You raced away from him before he could harm you as if you knew he was there, and you headed in my direction." Pluck at first thought he spoke to her in revulsion and with a desire to take his revenge upon her, and she became afraid of him, but the more he spoke, the more she realized he talked to her in reverence of her, and that made her all the more afraid. Malus continued, "You raced towards me with the blood of those who dared cross your path. Their blood speckled your short beige fur and lovely face. You raced towards me, and my heart pounded as if it would burst as you drew near," he stated as he placed a hand to his chest. "You were a wonder to behold and I wanted you, I wanted you more than anything else I have ever wanted. You raced towards me and I moved towards you to take you into my arms, and that is when it happened. You thrust with your spear through the air as if pointing out your desire to join me, to become one with me. You thrust your spear three more times and then you struck. You struck me right here," Malus told her as he pointed to his heart. "I was shocked, and I regained some of my senses, not only did you wound me, but I never as much as lifted a weapon against you. It was like I couldn't. I looked to the spear in my heart and started to say something but then you wrapped your arms around me as if we were lovers who had been apart too long. You knocked me to the ground as if to have your way with me. I stared up at you as you sat atop me, and you aroused so many feelings within me that I still can't explain or understand. I wanted to call out your name, but I didn't know it. I wanted to embrace you, but my arms wouldn't move. I wanted to take you right there but my life was slipping away. On the edge of death and ecstasy, that's how I first met you. I wanted you. I desired you more than anything else. I would have given anything to have you at that moment, but then you pulled the spear from my heart, lifted it high, and stabbed me one more time. You tenderly reached your bloody hand down to me and touched the side of my face. I thought I died right there, not a death to end all things but a death that ended the creature I had been. I believe I experienced for the first time what it means to have someone of importance. My life bled from me and as I gasped my last breaths, I realized something. I was going to die, I was going to die and you, who I didn't even know your name, would never know how important you were to me. I started laughing and gasping. I managed to place my hand to yours, and the moment I touched you, I knew. I knew that I had experienced a taboo among my people for I didn't want to have you or spoil you, I wanted you to find me as important as I had found you of importance, but then you did the cruelest thing..." Tears trickled down his cheeks as he told her, "You fled from me, you fled from my newfound desire, and I wept as I died. I died as I wept. I finally found the meaning of importance and she had killed me and left me. Do you know the torment you put me through

those fleeting mites?" Pluck didn't know what to say, shocked by his declaration. He bridged the gap between them as he motioned with his hands what his words spoke of, "I want to run my fingers through your short beige fur that I can still smell the blood of battle on as I pull you close to myself. The lovely face of determination and battle-rage that savagely took my life, I want to embrace with both of my hands. Do you understand now? You took my life and changed it somehow and now I must have yours. Do you understand why I must have your life?" Pluck stared at him and backed away from him as she said, "You're mad. What you felt wasn't... It was... I don't know what it was, but it's not what you claim it to be." "I know what importance is. Do you?" he questioned as he glanced down at the rose she held. "You do. You'll have to teach me of it. I experienced only a taste of it, but I know you can show me the full extent of its glorious depths." "You're mad," Pluck repeated. "What you speak of... It's infatuation, not..." "Perhaps that is what it was then and now, but I know... I will find you of great importance as you will find me equally as important. I will prove this to you. You will prove this to me." Malus reached out to seize her as he had always seized things he wanted in the past; it was the way of Shadows, but he knew this sort of action had no part in what he wanted, so he took a step back from her instead. "I must go speak with Abhora again," he told her. "Her tent is outside of the choker's range. I want you to stay here. You will experience some discomfort while I'm gone but I won't go too far as to hurt you. No, you have been hurt enough for today. I'll leave my robe that's upon you until I return and it will be as if I am beside you." Malus sighed as he thought of something else, and then he said, "The robe alone won't keep you safe. Loathen means to kill you. You're of importance to me, know this to be true. I'll prove this by putting my mark on you." "Your mark?" Pluck repeated. "We of the Shadow can brand our mark into flesh, wood, metal, and anything we want to claim as our own. The brand will protect you for none would dare touch anything that I have marked." He focused what little Maag-neg he had and his hand glowed hot and then he said, "Hold still. It will not hurt too much." "You are so quick to prove me right," Pluck told him. "Explain," Malus demanded. "This importance that you speak of... Would you cause me great pain to show it to me?" He looked to his glowing hand and then back to her, and then he said, "I guess you only need to wear my mark. I don't need to burn you to protect you." Malus moved to his bed that was in the center of the tent, then to a small chest underneath it, pulled out the chest, and opened it. He removed a pendant made of metal on a chain and the pendant had some sort of crest on it. He burned his mark on the back of the pendant. Malus put the chest back and then returned to Pluck. "Take it," he said. "Take it and wear it at all times." "Are you saying this is mine now?" Pluck questioned him. "I am," he replied as she took the pendant by the chain. "What of the Witness?" she inquired. "Her safety is of no importance to me," he replied. "I should return within the nal." Malus left, and Pluck stared at the pendant, not at the brand that was still burning down on the one side, but at the crest that was on the opposite side. GuideMa had been quiet the entire time, but now she couldn't be silent. "The Duke of Shangra will not like that another Necrom is after your heart." "My life," Pluck corrected her as she continued to stare at the pendant. "Malus is after my life." "Malus already has your life. He's after something far more valuable to him," GuideMa informed her. "Be very wary of what he has to offer. You're the Serviatrix and the Shadow may want to..." "I'm the False One," Pluck insisted. "There's no need to worry." "And yet I am still worrying. What if there is the slightest chance you aren't the False One?" GuideMa inquired, not sure anymore that Tabitha was the true Serviatrix. "I told Fairah if I was this savior of Wellspring the Great Creator would protect me. My

mother believes I'm the Serviatrix so she took comfort in this. Can you do the same?" "I don't know if I can take comfort that you're the true Serviatrix. I do despise you. I can take comfort that the Great Creator will protect the true Serviatrix." GuideMa glanced around the tent and said, "I'm starved. Do you think there is any food here? I can at least fill my belly before they decide to kill me." Pluck peered at her curiously and then moved to her as she raised the chain of the pendant. GuideMa backed up from her and questioned, "What are you doing? Do not touch me." "Wear this," Pluck told her. "I want you to wear this pendant." "I want nothing from you," GuideMa told her. "You are a vile Woman and..." "Wear it!" Pluck yelled out of desperation. "Please..." she started in a calmer voice. "I have enough to worry about without worrying they'll harm you, so wear it and give me some peace of mind." The Femor grabbed the pendant and chain from her grasp and placed it over her head, "There... Happy now?" "I doubt I will be happy again," Pluck told her. "How do we know this brand will keep me safe or that Malus won't tear into me the moment he sees I'm wearing it." "He did say it was mine," Pluck said. "He surely can't get angry over giving away something that belongs to me." "I'm not sure I can trust your judgment when it comes to this Shadow Necrom. I believe he has cast a spell on you." Pluck put a hand to the choker. "I don't mean that spell," GuideMa told her. "I believe you are attracted to Malus." "There's something about him," Pluck admitted. "I actually remember the moment he spoke of when the Shadow and Cursed army entered the encampment. I had stabbed a Shadow Assassin, and I had reached down to make sure I had killed him. I was touching his cheek and he put a hand to mine. In the midst of the battle, it was a strange sensation. I immediately removed myself from him, but something stirred within me. It was as if darkness reached out and touched me. I was so afraid, and I am more afraid now." Pluck turned to her and her emerald green eyes were desperate as she pleaded, "Please keep watch over me." "What am I your guard now?" GuideMa questioned her. "Do you think because you have given me this protective pendant I'll help you out in anyway?" "Please," Pluck begged again. "Keep watch over me. I don't fear that the Shadow will hurt me, I'm afraid that they want to change me. Malus and Abhora both spoke of the False One as if they needed me, so I believe that they want to corrupt me somehow and bring me over to their side. I think they want to make me a Shadow." "What do you want me to do about that?" GuideMa inquired. "I have no power against them." "No," Pluck said and then she whispered, "But you could fulfill your Duke's wish for me if they should succeed in turning me." She put a hand to the choker and said, "Malus has already bound me to him with some sort of spell, and he said that Abhora had very powerful Maag-neg. I don't want to do anything that's not me. I don't want to be used against Wellspring. I..." "I have returned," Malus said as he entered the tent and commanded the dark robe to return to him. The robe unwrapped itself from Pluck and returned to its master. Malus looked to Pluck and saw she wasn't wearing the pendant he gave her and then he noticed that the Femor was wearing it, and he uttered, "You gave my..." "You said it was mine," Pluck interrupted him. "You also said that the Witness was of no importance to you, but she is to me. I want to know that she's protected. I need to know she'll be protected from you also." Malus sounded upset as he replied, "I won't hurt the Witness. I won't hurt you either. The Witness will be protected from the others, but you..." He sounded a bit rejected by her as he stated, "I won't make another pendant for you." "I understand," Pluck told him. "I have spoken with Abhora," Malus said. "We leave in the morning to journey to the Cave of Warning." Pluck inquired, "Why do we go there?" "The prophecies of the False One are there. I want to read them all, and I want you to also hear them," he replied. "Why is that

important to you?" she questioned. "Because I believe you are this False One, and you should know what your future holds, and you're of importance to me. We have traveled a great distance this sun's cycle and many of us have also died this sun's cycle. We should bed. We have another long day of traveling tomorrow. Come sleep with me." Pluck looked to the large bed he motioned to as he started to undress, then she turned from him, and asked, "You want all of us to sleep in the same bed?" Malus placed the dark robe on a chair and started to remove his clothes as he looked to the Femor and said, "I had not planned to bed with the Witness, but what is one more female to me?" Pluck wasn't sure what he meant and she didn't want to know. She glanced at GuideMa and the Femor had the same shocked expression she imagined was on her own face, so she said, "I think GuideMa and myself should have our own sleeping area." "There's no place else but my tent. Sleep in my bed. Sleep on the ground. It doesn't matter to me," Malus spoke as he slipped his naked body under the covers of his bed. She glanced back at him and then looked around the tent. There was no furniture she could stretch out on unless she wanted to sleep straight up, so the ground or the bed were the only places she could sleep. Pluck looked up and then climbed up into the tree and found a branch she could comfortably curl up on. "GuideMa, there is room up here," Pluck offered as she stretched out her hand to her. The Femor looked to the Shadow Necrom who was busy watching the Woman and then she looked to Pluck who held out her hand for her. GuideMa moved over to what looked like a very uncomfortable chair and said, "Bed the Shadow or bed the vile Woman. I think I'll sleep in this chair." Pluck laughed softly and then she said, "I guess between him or me, the chair is more inviting." "I won't say more inviting," GuideMa replied as she repositioned herself in the hard seat. "This chair is far from inviting." Pluck laid back on the branch and tried to rest. So much had happened to her that sun's cycle, especially since it consisted of two existences. She had no idea what her life would be like with the Shadow Races or how long her life would be. She had given it to a Shadow Necrom who had pledged his... who had confessed his... Pluck wasn't sure what he pledge or confessed; it was all too confusing for her. She decided not to worry about any of those things. She decided to think of Votar and her friends. They should all be safely back at Shangra by now. Pluck closed her eyes and she envisioned herself stroking Votar's hair and she remembered how warm and loving his embrace had been. She fell asleep with those thoughts on her mind. Malus stared up the tree at her. He couldn't see her, and she couldn't see him. Malus wished she had joined him in his bed but didn't insist on it. He spoke of sleep and she... Pluck seemed very uncomfortable about the idea. He closed his eyes as his thoughts remained with her. A twig on the branch Pluck slept on slowly curled itself around her pinkie as she slept in exhausted sleep. It was as if Malus curled his own finger around hers. She may not be in his bed with him, but the tree and even the dark robe had touched her and they were apart of him. Her life belonged to him and soon she would understand the importance she held over him.

Chapter Three

Man's Return Home

Sun's cycles out from the Fletching Island...

The Seahorn...

Edward's cabin...

"My lord," Melee called out as he stood without. "Enter," Edward ordered. Melee entered and spoke, "High Priest Sagax wishes to speak with you on some matter." "Did he mention what this matter was?" "No, my lord." Edward commanded, "Show him in." "I shall show them in, my lord," Melee replied. He opened the door, and the high priest along with Priest Fallac and Monk Sophis entered. Edward sat at the captain's desk and looked to the three men as Melee came and stood off from them. "You wanted to speak to me?" "I did, Emperor Edward," Sagax spoke. "As once High Priest of Kismet, a prophecy was passed down about..." "The Serviatrix," Edward blurted, thinking of Pluck. "Where did you hear such a word?" Sagax inquired of him. "I heard of it when we were on Wellspring," he replied. "Wellspring... I have overheard conversations of this land where Necroms exist," Sagax stated. "The prophecy I mentioned has nothing to do with the Serviatrix." "What does it concern?" "A Child of Shadow," the high priest replied. "It is an oral prophecy spoken from one high priest to the next. The Chroniclers of Traditions also know of this prophecy." Edward ordered, "Speak it to me." "I shall, my lord, but it should be for your ears only. Send your guard out and I shall have these men with me also leave." Edward nodded to Melee, and the High Guard moved to the door, opened it, waited for the monk and priest to leave, and then he left also. High Priest Sagax began, "Man sailed off, leaving home and known behind. Their ships traveled over sea and rocked with the winds and then they met with five islands. Man flourished on these islands and then kings reigned. The five who had been one warred with each other and then an Emperor arose and Man was one once again. When Man sailed off, leaving home and known behind, Man was not alone. Faithful and true friends sailed with them and lived among them on the islands. Fear drove their faithful and true friends into hiding, but a season shall come when friends must reunite. A Child of Shadow shall blow in with the wind, land on Man's domain, and throw the five kingdoms into chaos, and only a wise Emperor can save them." "Child of Shadow..." Edward repeated. "There is more, my lord," Sagax stated, and then he continued, "Family cast aside and family gained must unite under one flag or all shall be swallowed up by the darkness. A Child of Shadow shall be the test. If nothing is done, Shadows shall stretch across the seas and invade were Man had fled and then all shall be lost." Edward questioned, "Do you believe that Adroit is this child?" "I do," Sagax replied. Edward stood, walked to a cabinet, and poured himself a glass of brandy, and he asked as he did so, "Would you like some brandy?" "Our order is only permitted to drink of the vine. Would you have any wine?" "I believe I saw some. Yes, here it is." Edward poured him a mug and gave it to the high priest, and Sagax gladly drank of it. "Melee," Edward called out. "Yes, my lord." "All of you may come back in." Melee entered along with Priest Fallac and Monk Sophis as Edward returned and sat at the desk. Fallac spoke up, "We heard that another sailor was killed and eaten." "Another sailor was

found murdered," Edward replied and noticed the monk eyeing his drink. "Would you two also like something to drink?" "We would," Priest Fallac answered. "Melee, pour my guests some drinks." The High Guard moved over to the cabinet as he questioned, seeing the two different bottles, "Wine or brandy?" "Wine," Monk Sophis replied. "Brandy, for myself," Priest Fallac spoke. Edward peered up with interest as Melee pour the holy men their drinks. Edward glanced at the high priest and noticed he had gone a little pale. "Fallac," Edward began after the two men received their mug and glass and they each had taken a drink. "Do you belong to the same order as the high priest?" "I do," Fallac replied as he took another drink of his brandy. Edward glanced at the high priest again and noticed he had gone even paler. "The ordeal you went through on the Isle of Kismet must have been very horrible." "It was," Fallac replied. "I had never seen so much blood." "You must have been very scared as you stood before the other High Priest during the ceremony." "I was," Fallac told him. "The Amalgamation Ceremony had just begun, and I can remember turning from the High Priest as a knock came to the cathedral doors. They had been barred so none could enter." Edward spoke, "I remember the story you told me. You let in the man thinking it was safe, but it was a ruse. The Shadow rushed in and started attacking people. You must have been very afraid as the soldiers moved all around you." "I was," Fallac admitted as he recounted that time in his head. "The soldiers encircled me to protect me but they fell quickly around me." Monk Sophis lowered his mug as the priest continued. "They tried to protect me, but how could they against something they could not see?" Edward stated, "It is hard to see your own men die for you." He thought of his time on MayPah Beach and spoke, "No matter that you have been taught that they are less than you, they are still men and their blood stains the ground." "It is hard to see my men die for me," Fallac admitted. Monk Sophis muttered, "My lord..." Edward interrupted him, "We have a responsibility to those who have died for us. Their deaths must never be in vain." The Emperor rose from his seat and Melee took notice of the mounting tension in the cabin and put a hand to his rapier as Edward said, "We owe it to our men, our subjects to live on and survive." Fallac peered up from this glass, realizing Edward most likely knew who he really was. Monk Sophis glanced back at Melee and then turned his attention back to Fallac. "How did you know?" Fallac questioned him. "Did the high priest betray me?" "I believe I should refer to you as Prince Fallac of Hort." Fallac turned to the high priest and said, "You did betray me to this lowly mongrel." "You should refer to me as your Emperor!" Edward shouted. "Or do you wish to incur my wrath over the ruse you attempted to play?" Prince Fallac remained silent. "I understand you were afraid and took on these disguises, and I shall not hold it against you or the High Priest for going along with it. I do hold against you the death of the two sailors." "I killed no one," Prince Fallac declared. "Why would I?" "Both of the sailors were from Hort and it is my guess that at least one of them recognized you somehow and either attempted blackmail or attempted to inform on you. The second sailor must have also found out and you silenced him or I should say you had your bodyguard silence him. You may not have killed the sailors yourself but you did order their deaths." "The assassin who is on board killed those men, not us. It tore off both of their arms and..." "Only one sailor's arm was torn off," Edward interrupted the Prince of Hort. "The other's was cut off." Prince Fallac glared at his bodyguard but remained silent. "If I were Prince Edward, I would have you immediately executed, but as I am Emperor Edward, I must consider the consequences of killing you. You will remain in your cabin till we anchor in Fletching. I shall then negotiate for your release with Hort and you shall be my guest in my castle until an arrangement can be made. You shall have to make restitution for

the dead sailors," Edward stated, and then he questioned, "Do you agree to this or shall you have your bodyguard fight your way through my men and jump overboard?" "I agree to your terms," Prince Fallac replied. "Melee, have six guards escort them back to their cabin and keep them under watch." "Yes, my lord," Melee replied and then ushered the men out of the cabin. Edward returned to his seat and addressed the high priest, "What should I do with you?" "You would have killed him if you had known upon landing on Kismet that he was the Prince of Hort," Sagax spoke. "Most likely I would have." "I am a man guided by the Great Creator. I save lives. I do not destroy them or stand idly by as they are destroyed." "I see," Edward replied. "For now, I shall have you bunk with some of my High Guards. I would not want the Prince of Hort taking out his anger on you." "I would not think Prince Fallac would do such a thing," Sagax said. "We do not know what anyone is capable of until they are forced into a corner. I should know. I was forced into that corner when the Necroms captured us."

* * *

Virago and Flaxen's cabin...

Edward opened the door and inquired before coming in, "May I enter?" "Yes," Virago replied. He walked in and looked to Adroit who was napping as he said, "She sleeps like any child." "Our daughter is like any child. She laughs, plays, cries, sleeps, and has an enormous capacity for love." "We shall have no further trouble over the sailors' deaths. I have discovered that Priest Fallac is, in fact, Prince Fallac of Hort," Edward informed her, and then he explained the whole situation to her. She spoke, "Fallac's bodyguard killed both sailors and then he tried to frame our daughter by cutting off the arm of the second one." "I have had both of them confined to their cabin. We shall anchor in Fletching tomorrow, and I shall send a fresh crew to contact the Hort Kingdom." "We shall be home on the morrow. I shall be glad of it. I never want to set foot on another ship for as long as I live, and we can go about the business of governing our kingdoms." Edward spoke, "There is much that we must consider. Do we do anything about Wellspring?" "Our daughter has talked of the Shadow and says that their plans reach far beyond Wellspring." "High Priest Sagax and I have talked of such things. He spoke to me of a prophecy that may involve our daughter." Edward proceeded to tell his wife of the prophecy he had put to memory. She asked, "What do you think it all means?" "I do not know," he replied as he took her hand. "But we shall have each other to face it."

* * *

The morning of the next sun's cycle, Seahorn, Oceanmight, and Blue Squaw anchored in the bay in Heron where Edward's adventure had begun. He, his wife, their daughter, Lady Flaxen, and all their guards proceeded to the Fletching Castle where they were greeted by the Queen, Edward's mother, along with her court within the throne room. "You have returned, my son," Queen Jezebel spoke from her throne. The throne King Stark would have sat upon remained empty as it had remained empty the past ten seasons. Edward's father had died and Queen Jezebel ruled in his stead. She didn't allow Edward to ascend to the throne when he came of age since he was a candidate for the Amalgamation and the Empress was well on in age. A king or queen couldn't participate. She would have eventually given the throne to Edward once he had an heir of his own old enough to participate in the Amalgamation. "I have, mother." "You look weary. I feared

the worse when you did not return." "We became shipwrecked," Edward told her. "We discovered Wellspring among other things." "I see that your betrothed is with you." "She is now my wife." "What of the Amalgamation?" "You may address me as Emperor and my wife as Empress Virago." The court of lords and ladies broke out in cheers and claps. "I mean to go tomorrow with my family and claim the palace." "Your family?" the Queen questioned. "I also acquired a daughter on our voyage." "You have not been gone that long, my son." "Before you ask," Edward started. "My wife adopted a child. Her name is Adroit. I claim her as mine." Queen Jezebel peered at those gathered before her and asked, "Would this child be the small one who wears the hood?" "She is," Edward replied. "Present her to the court," the Queen ordered. "I shall present her at another time," Edward told her. "We are all very tired and more so for this small child. I, my wife, and my daughter shall retire for the rest of the sun's cycle. I also wish to give all of my soldiers a rest. The sailors have already all gone home." "Take your leave, and I shall come visit you later," the Queen told him. Edward's group left and started for their rooms. Virago leaned to her husband and said, "You did not sound like an Emperor in there." "In the eyes of all of Fletching, I shall not be Emperor until I take the throne of the palace. All of us must rest before we take on any more responsibilities."

Later that sun's cycle around high sun...

Edward's room...

Virago and Adroit slept on Edward's bed. He had slept with them but had risen and went into the next room and sat in front of the fire and thought on all those things that weighed on his mind. The Stewart entered and spoke, "The Queen is here." Edward stood as his mother entered. She immediately went over and hugged him and then kissed him on the cheek. "You would not believe how much I have missed you," she told him. "Is your family asleep?" "They are. Did you expect that I would be up?" She told him, "You are your father's son. King Stark slept little over worrying. It may have been what sent him to meet the Great Creator earlier than he should." "His crown must have been heavy and I fear mine shall be all the more," he spoke as he motioned to a chair so she could sit. The Queen did and let no time elapse as she spoke, "The child... Is she wretched to behold?" "Why would you ask such a thing?" Edward inquired. "You did not present her to the court. I assumed there was a reason." "I cannot hide anything from you." "You are your mother's son." "My daughter is different from other children," Edward stated. "She is different because she is not of Man." "Explain." "Adroit is from a race of people who live on Wellspring," Edward explained. "She looks like a snake in appearance." The Queen's face wrinkled up in disgust, and then she said, "I wish to see this thing." Edward's voice rose as he stated, "Address Adroit by her name or as she, child, or girl. If you speak of her in any other way, I shall take great offense." "I want to see your child." "Come, peer upon her now while she is asleep," Edward said. "I only ask that you do nothing that shall wake her or say anything while we are in the bedroom." His mother nodded, and Edward led her into his room. The sun was still out and the room was well lit even with the curtains drawn. Queen Jezebel went over to the bed and saw Virago there holding the hand of some scaled creature. The creature held her hand in return. Jezebel glared at her son, and then she quietly left the room. She waited until he followed her back to the other room, and then Jezebel turned and angrily yelled at him in a whisper, "How can you bring a monstrosity like her into the castle? How could you bring her into the Fletching

Kingdom?" "I have learned to look beyond appearance. One who I played with as a child showed me that even children can be courageous, but she also showed me there is more to a person than what we see." "A child you played with? Do you speak of the girl I brought into the court so long ago to be your playmate?" the Queen inquired. "I do," Edward replied. "Han gave her a name. Her name is Pluck." "Commander Han never did explain what happened to the girl beyond that the child we knew was dead." "She did die in a way," Edward stated. "Pluck sacrificed herself to save me and was cursed with the appearance of a Necrom. Han trained her to become a High Guard and she journeyed with me as I went to claim the Amalgamation crown. She saved me again on Wellspring. She saved all of us on Wellspring, and then she abandoned me." "You sound as if you love her." "I do," Edward said. "I cannot explain the love I have for her. I love my wife. I am growing to love our daughter. I also love Pluck." "I see I was in error to bring her to the castle as a child, but I did so only to honor your father's final wish. It is of no consequence now." The Queen paused, and then she asked, "What about the thing..? I meant to say, what about the child that is in the other room? No one shall accept her as your daughter." "You have great wisdom, mother, but even you cannot peer into the heart of all. I shall work hard at convincing people to look beyond Adroit's appearance. I believe Adroit has the capacity of winning over hearts including yours." "I have no room in my heart for such a child," the Queen told him. "If you think I am harsh, wait till you present her to the court tomorrow."

Chapter Four

More Prophecy

Shangra the Great City...

Evening had come, and Kabal snuck out and made her way to Zenba and Zung's room. She knocked and entered, finding the two KellyZings along with Fairah, Quip, Staunch, and JuJu. "You're here late," Zenba spoke. "Has Pluck returned?" "No, but I do come here concerning her," Kabal replied. "I think it is about time you knew. Pluck will not be coming back." "Why is that?" Zenba uttered. "I'm not sure how to say it," Kabal told her.

Outside in the hallway a few mites earlier...

Tabitha along with her Roth bodyguard escaped the ever watchful eye of Gamemnon and made their way to the residence she heard Pluck last lived. She raised her hand to knock when she heard voices within and decided to listen in instead. Zenba demanded of the Duchess, "Tell us what it is." Kabal began to explain the deal Pluck had made with the Shadow Races so that the encampment had time to evacuate.

Out in the hallway...

Tabitha heard every detail and heard her Alba was most likely no more. She started to leave but decided to stay and continued listening.

Within the room...

Zenba lifted her four hands and placed them on her face as she wept and asked, "How could you let her do this? I never even said a proper goodbye." "Pluck felt it was the only way she could save us all," Fairah spoke up. "You knew?" Zenba questioned her as she turned to the Immortal. "You knew and never said anything this entire time?" "Do not blame Fairah or Kabal for the secret they had to keep," JuJu spoke up. "I blame..." Zenba began. "I blame myself for not seeing how devastated she must have been to keep the secret and yet say her goodbyes to us." Quip inquired, "What we do now? Me here for Pluck. Pluck gone, no reason me be here." Kabal replied, "I don't know what to tell you. I only thought you should be told the truth." "What about Votar?" Zenba inquired. "Did he know?" "He didn't and he doesn't," Kabal replied. "I haven't found the courage to tell him. I don't know if I'll ever find the courage. He loved her so much." "And you hated her!" Zenba screamed at the Duchess. "Why did it have to be you who knew this secret? She should have told me or at least someone who cared about her." "She didn't tell me," Kabal admitted, wondering if that placed her among Pluck's friends within the Beast Woman's heart. "I overheard." "Pluck faced her end all alone," Zenba spoke as she started crying again. "I should have been by her side." "I don't believe Pluck faced her end alone," Kabal spoke to give the KellyZing some minute piece of solace. "I believe GuideMa, Duke Gamemnon's Aviatrice, went with her." Zenba asked angrily, "Are you telling me someone who hated her as much as you hate her was the one who was by her side at the end?" Kabal thought about it and answered, "I believe GuideMa's feelings towards the Beast Woman are similar to mine." Fairah said, "Do not be angry with Kabal. I also knew and I also let her leave." Quip, who sat on Staunch's shoulder, inquired, "Why you not stop her?" "I did try," Fairah told them. "But Pluck insisted she had to trade her life for ours." Fairah thought back to those last mites she talked with her daughter and said, "I had asked her how long she thought she would remain safe if the Shadow and Curse decided to kill her. I insisted she was the Serviatrix and that she must save Wellspring. Pluck told me something that I shall never forget. She said, 'You told me that the Great Creator sees all and knows all. If he intended for me to save Wellspring, do you think He would let me die? You have to trust as I do that this is the right thing. You must let me go as I forced Votar to do so. I want to know that you are safe and your powers can help save Wellspring. The Serviatrix will have need of you when the Cursed and Shadow decide to attack again.' I shall never forget those words, and I questioned her about them." Fairah moved her gaze so that she looked at each person, and then she said, "I told her she spoke of Tabitha and not herself. I then questioned her if she believed she was the true Serviatrix, and Pluck told me, 'What matters is when the time comes you are there for the Serviatrix. The Serviatrix will need your guidance. She will be afraid to face the Shadow and the Cursed when the time comes, so promise me you will be there for her.'" Tabitha listened to the words spoken by her Alba and wondered if she was the true Serviatrix, why didn't she herself save those in the encampment. One who was claimed false, one who she marked as a servir gave up what little she had to save those who mostly hated her. Tabitha considered she could never make such a sacrifice. She didn't think she could give up her own life to save anyone. Fairah continued, "I promised Pluck. I promised to lend my wisdom and strength to the Serviatrix and then I let her go." "I could never have let her go," Zenba said. "And that is why, beloved friend of my daughter, she did not tell ye of her plan," Fairah spoke as tears filled her own eyes. "She had to go and ye would have never let her." A knock interrupted their conversation, and Zung answered the door to find Tabitha standing in the hallway. Zenba flew up to her brother and snapped, "Why are you here?" "I was in search of my Alba, and I heard she once lived here,"

Tabitha replied. "It would seem though that my search for her is in vain." "Did you overhear our conversation?" Kabal inquired, wary of the one she once considered a rival when Kabal cared whether or not she'd seized the heart of Duke Gamemnon. "I couldn't help but hear. All of you were so loud," Tabitha replied. Kabal questioned, "If you know Pluck isn't here, why did you knock?" "I..." Tabitha began as she looked across all the faces of those who loved Pluck. "Gamemnon is taking me to Iyllonia tomorrow. I want to invite all of you to go along with me and also the Duke of Torlawn who I see isn't here." Zenba questioned her, "Why would we go with you to this place, Iyllonia?" "A forgotten prophecy of the Serviatrix is there at the Mountain Temple of Iyllonia," Tabitha replied, and then she added as if she needed to convince them to come, "You started this quest with Pluck, I thought it only fitting you continue with me." "We will never submit that you are the Serviatrix!" Zenba yelled at her. "Look how loyal all of you are to her," Tabitha said. "I'm jealous. I wish I had those as loyal as you." "Zenba has a point," Kabal spoke up. "Why should we go with you?" "I overheard what the Immortal Woman said of my Alba," Tabitha replied. "The one who was once Pluck said if she was the true Serviatrix she would not die by the Shadow and/or Cursed. Don't you wish to hear more of the prophecy to see if Alba is the one? If she is the one, she can't be dead, and if she's not dead, she will find her way to one of these places of prophecy." "What are all of ye afraid of?" JuJu questioned them when everyone fell silent. "Truth is truth." Zung said, "I would like to see this prophecy for myself." Quip said, "Me and Staunch also want see." "I shall also go," Fairah stated. "Fine!" Zenba snapped. "Pluck is still alive, so I'll go with all of you. Maybe we'll find some sort of clue as to where the Shadow Races took her." Tabitha turned to the Duchess and asked of her, "What about you, Kabal?" "I particularly don't want to go anywhere with Gamemnon or you, but then there is my brother. He'll want to go, so that means I'll have to tell him of Pluck," she replied, and then Kabal stated, "I thought I had a few more sun's cycles before his anger would be pointed at me." Kabal thought over the actions of the fiery-haired Necrom and then spoke, "I would have thought you would have no doubt that you're the Serviatrix." "Ofcourse I'm the Serviatrix. I was talking about your beliefs, not mine," Tabitha stated.

* * *

Cave of Warning...

Pluck stayed close to GuideMa, not sure Malus spoke true of his mark and the pendant she made the Femor wear. Malus stayed close to Pluck as Loathen glared at her the entire time they walked to their destination. Abhora, Mar, and Zephen were also there. They had all rose early in the morning before the sun rose over the horizon and started their trek, and they finally arrived at their destination and stood within the cave, peering at pictures painted all over the walls. Mounted wall torches lit up the area as if the cave was still in use. Mar, the Shadow Dreadgon, peered at all the cave paintings as he inquired, "Are these the writings you spoke of, Abhora?" "No, they hold no significance," she replied, then moved to a bowl of stone sitting on a stalagmite, removed her knife, grabbed Zephen from the air, cut his jade leg before he could utter a word, and blood ran down his leg and drip into the bowl. "Curse you, you Shadow Femor. If you think I'll..." Zephen started to yell. "Quiet! I needed your blood, not your life," Abhora snapped at him. A deep voice from the bowl spoke, "The payment has been paid. What do you require?" "Tell us of the prophecy concerning the Serviatrixes," GuideMa commanded. The bowl

recited the prophecy, "Heed this warning and this promise. Man shall be the Twilight that breaks before the return of those cursed. Those who are proclaimed to be the Serviatrix shall spring up three-fold, but only one shall claim to be false. Beware and take care of this False One, she shall bring with her a potential for despair and a capacity for hope. A mark shall brand her, a mark of two kingdoms that must never unite. Bring the False One to the side of despair and Wellspring shall be yours, but if the False One clings to hope, the Serviatrix shall not be stopped. You shall know this False One by the one who comes to witness her end. This Witness shall see all things pertaining to the Serviatrix and shall be protected by the False One. Cling to despair and you shall be victorious. For one Serviatrix to rise, two must fall, and with the fall comes victory. Heed this warning and this promise." Pluck asked, "Why did you want me to hear this prophecy?" Malus told her, "We wanted you to hear this prophecy for we believe you are the one to bring about despair. You're the one claiming to be false, but we believe you can become the true Serviatrix." GuideMa turned to Pluck and said, "For one Serviatrix to rise, two must fall. I think they want you to kill Tabitha and any other Serviatrix that might come forward." "Yes," Malus told Pluck. "Do this and you can become the Serviatrix. You will gain the glory and power of the title." "You are of Shadow, why would you want me to be the Serviatrix?" Pluck questioned. "The Serviatrix saves Wellspring from you." Abhora told her, "It is said the Serviatrix saves Wellspring from a coming darkness. Who's to say we or the Cursed are this coming darkness? You are meant to save Wellspring so save it. Claim what is rightfully yours." "I need some fresh air," Pluck spoke as she started to panic. "I need some light." She turned to Malus and said, "Allow me to go back outside. This cave is stifling." "The cave or the words you heard in the cave?" he questioned her. "Both," Pluck replied. "Now allow me to go so that I can think." "Go," he commanded her. "Go and take the Witness with you." Pluck immediately turned and raced out of the cave as GuideMa followed her. Abhora moved to Malus and inquired, "What do you think?" "The False One's confused. We can use her confusion." "This prophecy is two-sided," Abhora spoke. "She could help us as she can as easily destroy us." "I know," Malus told her. "I know. Why do you think I took her life? It's mine and none will have it, even Pluck herself." "If she is to be the Serviatrix and crush the other two, there's a place she must be and very soon. We should take her or you will need to set her free so she can travel there," Abhora told him. "I already told you... She's mine. She will always be mine. Now tell me about this place."

Outside...

Pluck ran for the surface, then paused, and gasped for air as if she had been under water for too long. "Are you panicking?" GuideMa questioned her. "Yes," Pluck snapped. "Can't you see that? I thought anyone could see that!" "What are you afraid of?" "What they want to use me for," Pluck answered. "Afraid of what or afraid they will?" "Both," Pluck replied. "But mostly that they will." She turned to GuideMa with determination on her face, and Pluck said, "Remember your promise. Don't let them use me. No matter what... don't let them use me." "I remember making no promise," GuideMa told her. Pluck moved quickly to her and seized her two lower shoulders and said, "Would you let them use me? Would you let them use me to hurt your Duke?" "Never," GuideMa replied. Pluck let out a great sigh as if GuideMa's words had relieved an enormous burden. She released the Femor and stepped back from her as Malus joined them. He noticed the white rose Pluck still carried with her. "Come with me," he ordered them. They followed the Shadow Necrom around the outside of the large cave till they came upon a thorny vine growing

up the side of the rocks. The vine had red flowers growing all over it. Malus picked one, smelled of its sweet scent, and then turned to the two females. "Do you know what sort of rose this is?" he asked. "It is the same rose that you hold." Pluck glanced at her white flower, and then she questioned, "What sort of rose is it?" "A very rare one, so rare many believe it's extinct. The vine is full of thorns but the stem that produces the flower has no thorns," Malus told them, then walked over to Pluck, offered her the red rose to her, and said, "Take of my single flower." She looked to the red rose and then the one she held, and then she looked to Malus and asked, "Why do you want me to?" "I see that you already have a flower from one. I can smell his scent upon it. I should rip the flower from your grasp and destroy the white rose, but instead, I want you to take mine. I want you to hold both of them. You are conflicted right now so hold both until you are no longer conflicted." "At that point, what do you want me to do?" she asked. "When that time comes, I want you to give me the rose that is insignificant to you. I want you to prove to me where your importance lies." "I understand," Pluck told him as she took the red rose from him, and then she asked, "The rose has a name." "It does," Malus said. "The species of rose is called Alba." Pluck glanced at GuideMa and saw that the Femor wasn't shocked by the name as if she had known all along. "I thought Alba was a curse or means a curse," Pluck spoke. "By no means does it mean a curse. There is beauty and strength within Alba," Malus told her. "I have taken your flower," Pluck said. "Was there anything else you wanted to show me or may I return to your tent?" "There was nothing else," he replied, removed his dark robe, and wrapped it around her. "Return to my tent and go nowhere else." She nodded and walked off, holding a flower in each hand as she peered at them. Malus watched the two females leave till he could see them no more and then he returned to the cave. Pluck questioned GuideMa, "Have you always known the true meaning of Alba?" "I have," she replied. "I told its meaning to Duchess Kabal." "Why did Kabal really call me Alba?" "You will have to ask her that," GuideMa replied. "I doubt I'll ever get the chance to," Pluck stated as she continued to look at the red and white rose.

The next sun's cycle in Malus' tent...

"What are you doing?" GuideMa finally questioned the Woman after she had enough of Pluck sitting up in the tent's tree peering at two roses. Pluck, who no longer wore the dark robe, questioned her, "What do you mean?" "Have you dug your grave here? Are you waiting for Malus to completely take your life?" GuideMa asked. "You are as if you are dead. Your fighting spirit has left you. Don't you want to return to your friends and Votar?" "You're so angry," Pluck spoke. "Why are you so angry? I'm a False One. I'm..." "Is it Malus?" GuideMa questioned her. "Have you fallen for him? Do you intend to..?" "There's a dark attraction about him," Pluck admitted. "But this darkness frightens me. There's also a sadness about him as there's a sadness within me, and I feel drawn to that part of him, but I don't believe its love. It is just I'm not sure I can escape with this—" she spoke as she touched the Gold Choker of Fettering, "—prison he has bound me with. Also, I believe all my friends and Votar hate me for leaving the way I did. It was selfish of me to say goodbye without allowing them to say goodbye." "You haven't mentioned anything about being the Serviatrix." "I realize now that I'm the False One," Pluck replied. "I have allowed many to believe I'm her." GuideMa questioned, "Do you honestly believe Tabitha is the true Serviatrix?" "Don't you?" GuideMa replied, "I'm beginning to have my doubts." Pluck laughed and said, "Are you then saying that you believe I'm the true Serviatrix?" She didn't reply. Pluck

slipped down from the tree and landed on the ground as her tone turned to anger, and she said, "You can't believe I'm her. I'm no Daughter of a King, and I'm a Woman. How can I unite the Necroms when they despise my kind? How can you believe I'm the Serviatrix when you also despise me? I can't be the one to save Wellspring. I can't even save myself from the Shadow." GuideMa remained quiet. Pluck stood there defeated by her silence and said, "I don't know why you even brought this up. Unless you only meant to torment me." "I brought it up..." GuideMa began, walked over to Pluck, started to say something, then stormed outside, and stood by the entrance. She stood there for a few mites, thinking things over in her mind, then she stormed back in, and yelled, "You are a vile Woman!" Pluck had been crying and lifted her gaze to the Femor as tears continued to stream down her face and she said, "I know you don't like me. I know you hate me. You don't have to yell at me." Malus approached his tent and stopped from entering when he heard the two females speaking. GuideMa was upset over her own temper, and she stated, "You're correct. I don't need to yell at you. I just want you to go back to your irritating self. I want you to be the vile Woman who never gives up. I want you to be the vile Woman who sees hope in all situations. I want you..." "I can't," Pluck interrupted. "I can't find hope in this situation. All I see around me is despair and cruelty. We're not the only ones here that the Shadow have as prisoners or I should say, had as prisoners. They torture and eat the other races. I don't want to be here anymore. I might not be dead, but I'm slowly dying here. I'm drowning in all this evil. I feel the darkness pulling me in. The Dragon Tree, I've been having more and more dreams about it that I can't even sleep. I think I'm going to lose myself here. You need to leave this place while you can. I can't protect you. I can't protect myself." Malus entered the tent, wearing his dark robe once again, and Pluck wiped her eyes. "I have found you some fruits and nuts for you to eat since you will not eat of the flesh I have offered you," he told them. "Come, fill yourselves." "May I speak with you?" GuideMa questioned the Shadow Necrom. He nodded and GuideMa walked to one side of the tent away from Pluck. Malus set the food he gathered on a table and then followed the Femor. "What are your ultimate intentions for Pluck?" she asked him. "What concern is it of the Witness?" "If you intend to kill her, you're already on track for that, but if you intend for her to survive, you need to get her out of here. Pluck will die here." "She is mine. She will always be mine." His answer infuriated GuideMa but she kept her anger in check as she questioned him in a whisper, "What happens when the others find out that Pluck is a Woman in a cursed form?" "They'll kill her," he replied. "It won't matter that she's the False One or that she belongs to me." "How will you feel once they kill what is yours? You claim that she is of importance to you. I doubt that means love. I doubt any Shadow is capable of love, but Pluck does mean something to you." Malus thought about what the Femor said and considered the deadly game he was playing with the other Shadows. GuideMa told him, "I heard whispers among the Shadows. Some of them know that Pluck's a Woman." "How could they? Only we knew. The two of us. Did you betray her secret?" "You forget we were not alone in the Woods of Spry. Anyone of those three Shadows who was trying to kill her could have returned and witnessed her transformation," she told him. "It won't be long and many will know." Malus rushed to the tent entrance, then went outside, and peered around the camp. Many of the Shadows glared at him as if they knew his secret. He returned to his tent. GuideMa believed he wouldn't answer her, so she asked, "What are you willing to do to keep her alive?" "I would fight till there is no longer breath in me," he replied. "I would give my life for hers." "Would you let her go?" GuideMa questioned him. "Would you give her back her life?" "Her life is mine. Her life will

always be mine," he answered. "But maybe I can let her go. I can let her go for a little while." Malus walked over to Pluck and said, "Come to me. I'll give you my dark robe. It is me as I am it, so as long as you wear it, you can go anywhere you please." "Are you saying you're giving me this robe? You are giving me this robe so I can leave?" "Yes, the dark robe will be yours once we are away from the camp," he answered her. "I won't take it back. I'll always be apart of you," Malus told her. "Now come with me." The two females followed him, and he walked them through the Woods of Spry to the edge of a cliff where he pointed off in the distance, then handed GuideMa a bag of gold, and told both of the females, "There's a town on the other side of these woods that we haven't spoiled. It's called WoodsMirer and there you can buy some sort of steeds and then continue on your way. If you doubt you are the Serviatrix, and you want to know for sure if you are the False One, go to the TowerRoth Citadel and be there by tomorrow evening for that is when something will happen." Pluck questioned him, "Why should we go there for this something to happen?" "All I will say is go and you will know," he replied then glanced at GuideMa and added, "Or at least one of you will know." Malus removed the dark robe and put it on Pluck as he said, "I will give you my robe now." The dark robe transformed into a dark long cloak that flowed to the ground and engulfed Pluck as if it was two sizes too big. The cloak looked shredded and worn but it also looked as if a shadow engulfed her with a dark mass of pitch-black. "It has never done that before," he said. "The last time you wore it, did it change its appearance?" "No," Pluck replied. "It was as it had been on you, a robe." "Maybe it has changed its shape because you have given it to Pluck," GuideMa suggested. "I think a cloak suits her better." "I believe you are right," Malus spoke. "I may have given it to you and it is now yours, but this dark robe, this dark cloak is as much me as I am me. The cloak will wrap you up in my arms and I will never let you go. Your life is still mine, no male will take you from me." Pluck wondered if he could peer into her mind and see that she thought of Votar, that she hadn't stopped thinking of Votar. "Go now," Malus ordered her. "I will watch over you from here till I can no longer see you." They left the cliff and started down a path that led to the town in the distance. Pluck and GuideMa traveled for a nal in silence and then the Femor finally spoke up. "Aren't you glad he released you?" "Is that what he did?" Pluck questioned as she put a hand to the choker. "Here I thought he only put me on a long leash." "Something's wrong with you," GuideMa told her. "You can return to your Duke. You should be very happy." "The Shadow still have a plan for me," Pluck told her. "I believe they released me, hoping I'll kill the other Serviatrixes and rise and become their Serviatrix." "For a Serviatrix to rise, two must fall," GuideMa told her. "If you don't rise, then Tabitha or this other Serviatrix will. It's what must be done. Kill Tabitha or eliminate her some other way before she or Gamemnon eliminates you." Pluck glared at the Femor for even suggesting such a thing, but her glare was also full of worry as if the bleak future laid out for her was what was fated. GuideMa told her, "You might not like it, but the Shadow are right about one thing, there can only be one Serviatrix." Noise to their right caused Pluck to draw the Lux and lightning flashed from its blade. "Now you draw the sword," GuideMa spoke. "You had its power all along and now you draw it." "I believe we might have need of its power now," Pluck told her as a creature crept out of the woods to them. "Is that..?" "Yes," GuideMa replied. "It's the young Giant Lunar Flytrap. It's walking on two... dare I say legs... as if it's an animal." The young Giant Lunar Flytrap barked as if it were an excited dog, ran over to the Femor, and circled her and wagged a vine that kind of looked like a tail. "Is there anything you want to tell me?" Pluck questioned. "You mean like when the Giant Lunar Flytrap

in the ruined underground temple died and dropped a seed which I brought to the encampment and this young one sprung up? No," GuideMa replied. "There isn't anything to say." "He does seem happy to see you," Pluck pointed out as if she needed to. "It's not as big as the other, but its nearly my size." "It was only to my knees the last time I saw it," GuideMa stated. "It looks like you've gained a friend." "I don't need any friends," GuideMa spoke as she tried to shoo the Giant Lunar Flytrap away. "What I need is a steed. I'm very tired of walking." "You are one of the lie-about," Pluck said. The Giant Lunar Flytrap knelt to GuideMa as if waiting for her to sit upon it. The Femor glanced at Pluck. "What's the worse that can happen?" Pluck questioned. GuideMa carefully mounted the Giant Lunar Flytrap and then it straightened and bore her weight with ease. "One steed down," Pluck said. "Now we only need to purchase another when we reach the town. We could be there much faster and maybe even rent a room and sleep if you allow me to..." "Don't even ask," GuideMa snapped at her. "I don't want some vile Woman riding behind me." "Here I was hoping to buy some clean clothes and take a bath since we have to buy one less steed. Are you sure you can't put up with me a few nals as we ride into the town?" "A bath?" GuideMa repeated as she looked to the town in the distance. "The town ahead does have hot springs and are known for a small bathhouse." The Femor held out her hand and the Giant Lunar Flytrap remained steady beneath her as she said, "For a hot bath, I could tolerate anything." Pluck grabbed her hand and leapt up behind the Femor, and GuideMa urged her plant-beast with a spoken word. They rode for a few mites through the woods and came to level ground. Pluck balanced herself on the back of the Giant Lunar Flytrap so not to have to hold on to GuideMa. She knew the Femor would only hate it all the more if she held onto her. GuideMa broke the silence as she asked, "What do you think we're supposed to see at this TowerRoth Citadel tomorrow?" "I don't know. I don't know that it matters. I'm the False One. I'm the one the Shadow wants to use against Wellspring," Pluck stated, then leaned closer to the Femor, and said, "Remember the promise you made. Don't allow them to use me." "I remember making no such promise," GuideMa told her. "And don't get so close or I'll knock you off and you can run the rest of the way." Pluck leaned back from her and tried not to touch her as much as possible. She thought about her future and those on Wellspring. She also thought about being reunited with her friends, mother, and Votar. The reunion would be hard, but one she would gladly endure it just to see all of them again.

* * *

The Fletching Kingdom...

Edward's room...

Virago busied herself with making sure Adroit looked her best as Lady Flaxen dressed the child. "Are you sure you do not want me to appear as I did when I first came aboard the ship?" Adroit questioned. "I am sure," Virago said as she placed both of her hands to the child's cheek, "This is the you who is the butterfly." "Many will be afraid when they see me," Adroit spoke. "They will be afraid just as the soldiers and sailors were." "They shall be afraid because they have never seen one of your kind before." "I am of the Shadow. I..." "You are no longer of the Shadow," Virago interrupted her. "You are my daughter." Virago straightened and peered down at the child, and then she said, "You do not need to do this. I can tell your father that you..." "I'll do this," Adroit said. "I'll do this for father, and I'll do this for you. I will be afraid. Will you stay by

my side?" "I shall hold your hand the entire time," Virago told her. Brio knocked on the outside door and said, "Lady Flaxen, tell the Empress it is time." "Are you ready?" Flaxen questioned her friend. "No, but we should go," Virago said as she held out her hand for her daughter.

Sometime later...

Fletching Castle throne room...

Edward spoke to the lords and ladies assembled there as he stood on the middle step leading up to the platform where four thrones stood. The Queen was behind him up on her throne. "I am here to present my daughter to you," Edward told them. "She is not like us. She is of a different race. You are to treat her with respect for I shall take it as a personal insult if you do otherwise." He lifted his voice and said, "I would like to introduce the court to Empress Virago and our daughter, Adroit." Virago walked out holding Adroit's hand and Lady Flaxen was a short distance behind them. Some of the lords and ladies gasped but no one said a word. "As you can see, my daughter is different from us," Edward said as he walked over to his wife, kissed her on the cheek, then bent to Adroit, and said, "My daughter, welcome home."

Later that sun's cycle...

Virago took Adroit to a secluded garden Edward had suggested she could play in called the East Garden. Adroit loved all the flowers in the garden, but she especially loved the butterflies that fluttered about. There were many different species flying above the flowers. Virago smiled as she and Lady Flaxen looked on. "I do not believe it," a voice called out. "I see a giant frog wearing a dress and it is playing in my garden." A girl of about eight seasons walked into the garden and immediately ran over to Adroit. The girl had long blonde curly hair and blue eyes and wore a courtly dress. "You are," the girl exclaimed. "You are a giant frog wearing a dress." Virago and Flaxen both stood and started for the two children as Brio looked on. The girl took Adroit's hands and held them in her own as she examined them, and then the girl said, "You have scales all over your body. You are not a frog." "Who are you?" Virago questioned the girl. "I am the great-niece to the Queen," she replied. "My name is Pepin." Adroit peered at the girl as she continued to look her over. Pepin asked, "Is it some sort of pet?" "What is a pet?" Adroit questioned. "It speaks," Pepin uttered and then gasped with glee. "I must have it. The Queen shall give you anything if you shall let me have it." Virago tried not to take offense from the girl, and she spoke in a gentle tone that didn't give away her agitation, "Pepin, this is Adroit, and she is my daughter." "Daughter?" she repeated as if it were a foreign word. "Did you kiss a frog, hoping to turn him into a prince and instead, you had babies?" "There is more to babies than kissing," Virago told her. "Adroit is a child like you, not a pet." Pepin released her and took a step back to get a better look at her. "She still looks like a giant frog. Can I play with it?" Virago replied, "If you see Adroit as an it, no you may not play with her." "Too bad," Pepin spoke. "I would have liked to have played with it." Pepin turned to Virago and said, "You do know that I can make you give me this giant frog. The Queen is my great aunt." "Listen here," Flaxen started all in a huff. "Do you know who you are talking to? This is..." "I believe we can tell Pepin who I am at another time," Virago told her friend. The girl commanded them as if she were the Queen herself, "You should leave my garden." "Why you little..." "We shall leave," Virago spoke, interrupting Flaxen. "My daughter, are you ready to go?" "Is this one like me?" Adroit questioned as this time she took

Pepin's hands and examined her. "She is a Man child?" "I am a woman!" Pepin declared. "She is like you," Virago told her. "She is a child." Adroit questioned, "She is of importance to the Queen, and the Queen is of importance to father?" Virago nodded. "I will make sure she is of importance to me," Adroit said, then went, and took her mother's hand. Pepin watched them leave as she muttered to herself, "The giant frog talks in an unusual manner. I shall also have to talk to my great aunt about the courtly lady who refused to give me her pet."

Chapter Five

Auror Array And The Race To A Throne

Gamemnon became enraged when he found out Tabitha had invited the others to go with them to the Mountain Temple of Iyllonia.

The presence of her Roth bodyguard prevented Gamemnon from doing anything about his rage. King Solom arrived and joined them on their journey. Tabitha rode in her father's DraKa along with her bodyguard. Gamemnon rode with a few of his guards in his DraKa, and Votar only allowed his advisor Nirva to ride along with him. Votar was still upset with his sister for lying to him. Fairah, Kabal, Zung, Zenba, and JuJu rode in another DraKa as Staunch walked beside the great beast and Quip rode on his shoulder. There was a dozen other DraKas as soldiers from Shangra and Torlawn escorted their duke to their destination. Votar's thoughts were with Pluck and how she had also lied to him. He considered she only agreed to wed him to make their departure easier and doubted her feelings for him. While he was still in Shangra, he had debated with Nirva about sending his soldiers in search of Pluck, but no one had any idea where she would be. Votar's only hope was that the prophecy at the Mountain Temple of Iyllonia would give clues to Pluck's location. The convoy stopped for the night at the foot of the mountain. They would head out at the break of dawn and head up to the temple at the top of the small mountain. Night slowly fell and nearly everyone settled in for the night at the small lodging. The lodging was situated at a higher elevation than the surrounding forest, and in the distance, Votar could see the lights of his city from the large window of his room. Kabal walked up behind him and paused halfway into the unlit room as she left the door behind her open so that the hallway's torches lit up her path. She didn't say anything to him, but Votar knew she was there. A few mites went by as he continued to stare at his city. "How long will you remain mad at me?" his sister inquired of him. "About which thing?" Votar questioned her in return. "When you dosed me so that I fell asleep and couldn't stop Pluck from leaving me or when you lied to me about where she went?" "I was actually referring to going along with her plan and not trying to stop her myself," Kabal answered. "I don't know," he said. "Perhaps if I am reunited with Pluck my anger will ease." "Against me or against her?" Kabal inquired. "Both," Votar replied, then said nothing for a few moments, and then he inquired, "Do you know..?" She walked further into the room when he didn't finish his question, and then she inquired, "Do I know if she loves you? If you have to ask, you don't deserve her love." Her brother still said nothing to her, so Kabal inquired, "Do I know if she wasn't bound by a pledge to give her life for us, would she still have agreed to wed you? I don't know. Pluck loves you, but..." Votar turned and moonlight set aglow his platinum

hair as he said, "But what?" "Pluck loves you, but I believe her heart is very fragile." "Nonsense," he stated. "Her heart is fierce and her heart is passionate." "Yes, her heart is those things, but it's also fragile," Kabal told him. "I know you proclaimed your love for her before you knew she was of Man and again within the encampment, but how many times did you reject her? How many times did you threaten to take her life? How many times did you tell her that you hated her?" He thought back and remembered those times and couldn't bear to answer his sister, so instead, he asked, "When did you become her advocate?" "I'm far from her advocate," Kabal replied. "I'm merely stating what I've observed. You fault Pluck for lying to you and then leaving you, but what about what you have done to her? You can't proclaim your love to someone and then rip that love from their grasp. It's unfair." "I have done as you said. I have proclaimed an undying love. I never thought I could love again, not after Bella, but then Pluck appeared in my city, she appeared and everything changed for me. You're also right about me murdering our love. I despised her for who she was underneath her skin. Our forefathers hated Man, so I hated Man." "Are you using that as an excuse?" "No," Votar answered. "I'm only saying..." He let out a frustrated grunt, and then he stated, "I don't know what I'm trying to say." "When we find Pluck, you need to know your heart completely. If you truly love her, embrace her and never let her go." He said, "You speak of her as if she's still alive." "You don't believe that Pluck's alive?" "I know she's alive," Votar replied. "I'm just surprised that you believe the same thing." Kabal spoke, "How could someone as infuriating as her, not survive?" "I was wrong before. I have also observed something," Votar spoke as he looked at his sister. "You aren't her advocate. You're her friend." "Why would you say such a thing?" she questioned him as if she was appalled. "The way you speak about her," he replied. "I hear a tenderness towards Pluck that wasn't there before. And why else would you care if she has a fragile heart? But most importantly..." He took his sister's hand and said, "You've been crying for the last few mites." "I have not," Kabal insisted as she lifted her hand and felt her wet cheek. "I have been crying," she uttered in surprise. "I never even noticed. It doesn't mean anything. I was only crying because... You see I just felt your pain and... I know you loved her and..." Votar understood his sister more than she understood herself, so he wrapped her in his arms and said, "I know. I know what Pluck has become to you. You're usually so distant with people. You are yourself around Gamemnon and me, but you have always kept yourself far from everyone else since our parents died. Somehow Pluck has..." "No, don't say such things," Kabal whispered back to him. "I despise the vile Woman. She's manipulative and conniving. I see right through her. I know exactly what type of person she is. She's... Pluck is... Alba is..." Kabal broke down and wept on her brother's shoulder as she spoke, "I'm a horrible person. I never once tried to stop her. I just let her go off by herself to... to... I don't even want to think about what they did to her." "You couldn't have stopped her," Votar told her. "Pluck still would have surrendered herself." "But I should have at least tried. Instead, I helped her leave. I dosed you and helped her leave. I'm no friend of hers." "Don't you see. You are her friend. You helped her. You helped her in the most cruel way possible for me, but you still helped her in what must have been a very difficult departure." "No," Kabal insisted. "I'm no friend of hers. She is a vile Woman, and I am a... I'm a... I'm someone who only thinks of herself." In the morning, the DraKa convoy headed up the mountain. Snow replaced grass, and ice covered the mountain. They arrived at the Mountain Temple of Iyllonia, and the Trife priests came out to greet them. Gamemnon explained that they wanted to see the prophecy, so the Trife priest ushered them into a room where the prophecy was written on a stone blue as ice. Everyone gathered

around the stone and a Trife priest, educated in the old ways of the Trife and their written language, read the inscription to them. "One comes by sea, the other from a rival kingdom, and the third from among outcast. The Serviatrix shall appear and the claim of false Serviatrixes shall multiply. The face of the Serviatrix shall take her spot immediately. The arm of the Serviatrix shall grasp for gold. The heart of the Serviatrix shall act first. The three shall finally meet but not all at once." The Trife priest paused and then continued, "As cords of a rope, the Serviatrix is strong. Bind their hands, and the true Serviatrix's strength shall increase. The one who is atop of the Throne of Kroth when the dancing lights of green and blue begin and become as Man's blood shall lead them. Look for the sign when Auror the Greater and Array the Lesser are furthest apart." "What does this speak of?" Gamemnon questioned. "The dancing lights could be the Auror Array," Nirva replied. "As darkness approaches, lights of blue and green dance about the sky in Umer, the Necrom's most northern territory. Many from across Wellspring journey there and view the heavenly sight. I've been told it's a wonder to behold." "Kroth was the first king of the Roth," Tabitha spoke up. "He ruled long ago from a citadel on the border of the Roth Kingdom and the Necrom Kingdom. The TowerRoth Citadel lies on the other side of Umer. I've been told that the Auror Array is also visible there." "We need to go into the Roth Kingdom," Gamemnon stated. Tabitha said, "I'll send word to my father, King Malodor in the Roth Kingdom so that he can send word ahead of us to grant us full access to the TowerRoth Citadel." King Solom inquired, "Your father?" Tabitha walked over to him and took Solom's hands tenderly in hers as she said, "You are my real father. King Malodor raised me and is like a father to me, but you are more precious to me. Tell me once that it is your wish that I never refer to King Malodor as my father, and I'll grant it immediately." "He did raise you," King Solom spoke. "He raised you and it hurts me to know I missed so many seasons with you, but it is not my wish that you forget the one who raised you." "Thank you," Tabitha said, and then she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "I need to contact King Malodor." She turned to a Trife priest and inquired of him, "Do you have Messenger Hawks here?" "We do. Follow me," he said, and Tabitha left with him. A few mites went by as Gamemnon had the Trife priest reread the prophecy to them. "I think I understand this one part," JuJu stated. "Once a season, Auror the Great and Array the Lesser reach the point at which they are farthest apart." He lifted his one leg and counted on his toes, and then JuJu said, "It shall occur in two sun's cycles." "Pluck shall be there," Fairah spoke up. "We shall find her seated on the throne." She sounded very relieved as she spoke, "The Great Creator has shown us where she shall be." "We have to go," Zenba spoke up. "We have to go so that we'll be reunited with her." Zung said, "The TowerRoth Citadel is in the Roth Kingdom and its borders have been closed for a very long time. Can Tabitha gain us entrance?" "As she said," Gamemnon started. "She is the daughter of King Malodor. He would grant her almost anything." Nirva moved forward and examined the stone more closely. Gamemnon glanced at JuJu and said, "I don't think we should wait on a reply. The trip is nearly two sun's cycles. We should start out now and request the reply in route." Votar accused, "You mean you want to arrive in time for Tabitha to sit on the throne before Pluck has a chance to?" "I do not deny it," Gamemnon replied. "Of what I am to understand, the false Serviatrix is dead." "Pluck is not dead!" Votar declared. "If she is not dead and Pluck is the true Serviatrix, would she not be seated on the throne at the designated time?" Gamemnon questioned his friend. Votar thought about it and he said, "She would be. She will be. We should heed Gamemnon's advice and make haste to TowerRoth Citadel." Tabitha returned and said, "I made a quick request and the Messenger Hawk is on its way." "Send another

hawk and inform King Malodor we are on our way to the citadel. We have little time to arrive before the time of the occurrence, so we'll await his answer en route." Tabitha left again to send out the second message. Everyone else left the room as Nirva spoke with two the Trife priests about the round stone. They prepared to leave the Mountain Temple within the nal.

* * *

The Fletching Kingdom...

Fletching Palace...

Edward, Ardor, Fracas, Vim, and High Priest Sagax took a tour of the palace. Hundreds of workers and servants were busy preparing the large structure for habitation again. It had been over two hundred sea- sons since a Fletching held the position of Emperor of the Five Kingdoms. A custodian and his family always lived within the palace to maintain its upkeep but soon hundreds would live within the palace. Sagax spoke, "I heard you delayed moving into the Fletching Palace." "I have," Edward replied. "Everyone is so tired. I also need my rest before I take the responsibility of Emperor so I have delayed the Palace Ceremony for another four sun's cycles. Did you contact the Chroniclers of Traditions to send a representative to me? I wish to know more about the prophecies related to the Child of Shadow and any pertaining to the Serviatrix." "I have," Sagax replied. "They have a monastery on Fletching so I sent a Courier Pigeon with your request. I received a reply and the monastery has sent a monk, and he should be here by tomorrow. They have also sent a ship to their main Monastery on Swelldom to make further inquiry into your request." "Grand Commander, how goes setting up barracks here in the palace for the Morgog Sentinels and High Guards who came with us to Wellspring and ventured back?" "Well, my lord," Ardor replied. "You still need to name the units that will be part of the palace and your personal guards. They shall no longer be High Guards or Morgog Sentinels." "What did the previous Emperor name his special units?" Ardor answered, "Knights." Edward replied, "I shall use Paladin and their ranks can consist of colors. I shall have you determine what color represents what rank." "I shall prepare a list of ranks by color, my lord," Ardor stated.

Fletching Castle...

Virago had the West Garden cleared for two nals so that Adroit could have a place to play in peace. No one dared say anything but there were already whispers of a monster in the castle. Lady Flaxen was there and she chased around the child until Flaxen could run no more, and she went and sat beside Virago. "Empress Virago," a maid called out as she approached and bowed. "Yes, what is it?" "The Queen has requested an audience with you," the maid replied. Virago glanced at her daughter. The maid re-spoke, "The Queen has requested an audience alone with you." Virago turned to the lady and whispered to her, "I wanted to rest a bit more before I did this." "You are the Empress," Flaxen told her. "Yes, but the Queen is Edward's mother and now my mother by law," Virago whispered back, stood, and told the maid, "I shall see her now. Where is she?" "Follow me," the maid said. "Adroit, I want you to remain with Flaxen and play in the garden till I return. If you become hungry, tell her." "Yes, mother." Virago followed the maid, and a Morgog Sentinel walked after her while Brio stayed with Lady Flaxen. Adroit walked up to Flaxen and questioned her, "May I go play with the

butterflies?" Flaxen peered over the garden and saw one fluttering over a flower, and she said, "You may. Just do not eat any." "Excuse me," a different maid called out. "I am looking for the Empress." Flaxen approached the maid who was carrying something, and she said, "Maybe I can help you." "A cousin of Edward's has sent this gift to her," the maid replied as she showed her a tiny dog. "A puppy," Flaxen exclaimed. "The Empress shall be overjoyed to receive this gift. I can take it." She took the tiny dog from the maid and said, "Look, Adroit, a puppy. Adroit?" She looked all around the garden and didn't see the child, so she called out, "Adroit!" Flaxen started to panic and asked, "Brio, where is Adroit." "I do not know," he replied. "I was looking upon you and not the child." "We must find her," Flaxen said. "Quick call for some guards to help in the search. You..." She turned to the maid and asked, "What is your name?" "I am Martha." "Martha, help us search for Adroit." "The monster!" Martha exclaimed. "Adroit is not a monster. Think of her more like a... more like a..." Flaxen uttered as she looked at the ball of fur in her arms. "Think of her more like a puppy. A puppy I cherish and the Empress adores. Please, you have to help me find her." The maid looked at the puppy in her arms, then into Flaxen's desperate face, and nodded, and then the two women ran in search of the child.

The Queen's sitting room...

The Castle Steward came in and announced, "Your great-niece is here to see you." "Send her in," Queen Jezebel ordered. Pepin came skipping in and said, "Auntie." She rushed over and gave her a big hug and the Queen kissed her on the cheek. "I saw a giant frog yesterday," Pepin told her. "It was in my secret garden." Virago arrived with the maid for her meeting with the Queen, and she paused outside the door when she heard Jezebel speaking to the girl, and Virago listened as she motioned with her finger for the maid with her to be silent. "A giant frog?" the Queen repeated. Pepin's maid spoke up, "I believe she means the creature the Emperor has claimed as his daughter." "You saw Adroit yesterday?" Jezebel questioned. "Is that its name? I want the giant frog," Pepin said. "Make Virago give me her pet frog." "I cannot make Virago do anything," the Queen explained. "Virago is the Empress." "I did not realize," Pepin spoke. "I was a little rude to her. Do you think she took offense? Do you think she shall not let me have the giant frog?" "Maybe I can trade my giant frog for you," Virago spoke up as she entered. "I do not think the Queen would mind." Jezebel said nothing as she wanted to see where the Empress would take this conversation with her great-niece. "I cannot be traded for the giant frog," Pepin told her. "I am the great-niece to the Queen." "Adroit is the daughter of the Empress," Virago stated. "I thought you played a joke on me," Pepin said. "The giant frog is really your daughter?" "She is," Virago spoke. "I guess I cannot have her as a pet," the girl stated. "Auntie, I am going to my secret garden. Come sit with me when you finish talking. I would like to have tea with you." Pepin left with her maid, and the Queen looked to the maid who escorted Virago in and the maid also left. "You still look tired," Jezebel stated. Virago spoke, "I am very. I have slept and slept and now I am tired of sleeping." "You have gone through an ordeal. Time is all that can restore your energy, but you must eat well and rest when you can," Jezebel told her. "I have made inquiries into your daughter's background. I am told she is of a people called the Shadow." "Her race is not the Shadow. The Shadow is more of... How do I explain it? They are..." "Invisible creatures who tried to slaughter all of you," Jezebel interrupted. "And you took one of their children." "The Shadow do not take care of their children like we do. They make them fend for themselves and if they can survive on their own, they live. I believe Adroit was abused

by them, and she does not understand many things." Virago questioned, "Why did you request this audience? I at first thought it would be a mother by law talking to her daughter by law for the first time, but it is not why you requested this audience." "I requested this audience because of the Child of Shadow. You should have never adopted her and you should not have forced Edward to do the same thing," Jezebel scolded her. "I never forced Edward to call Adroit his daughter. He took on the responsibility on his own. Why are you against such a thing?" "Necroms..." Jezebel spoke with aversion. "All of Man despises the Necroms, and once they hear that the Necroms are real, their hatred of them shall only grow stronger. Adroit is not a Necrom, but she is a creature that looks so much like a snake. Snakes are usually beheaded if they cross someone's path." Virago wanted to lash out at her, but she held her tongue, being she was Edward's mother and the Queen of Fletching. She stood without a word and headed out. Jezebel asked her, "Is our conversation already at an end?" "I am tired and I fear I shall not be able to keep my anger in check, so we shall have to continue this at another time." Flaxen rushed in and spoke hysterically, "Virago, Adroit has wandered off." "What?" "We cannot find her anywhere. We need more help. Most of the Morgog Sentinels and High Guards went with Edward. We need others to assist in the search." Virago turned to the Queen and started to ask for her assistance, but she doubted she would render any so instead she turned back and said, "I shall help you continue the search."

East Garden...

Queen Jezebel entered the only gate leading into the garden and ordered her soldiers, "Wait here and let no one or no thing enter." She continued alone to the small garden and found her great-niece there but she wasn't alone. The Child of Shadow was there also standing in the middle of a mob of butterflies. "Auntie," Pepin called out. "Look... The giant frog is here." Pepin took Adroit by the hand and led her over to a table where a tea set had already been set up. The Queen went and sat at the table as she peered at Adroit and said, "I heard you wandered off." "Wander?" Adroit repeated. "I have passed that test." "What test do you speak of?" the Queen asked. "A Child's Wander," Adroit replied. "I took my stone knife and survived ten sun's cycles alone." Jezebel spoke, "I meant you have left those who were watching over you without permission." "I requested that I be allowed to play with the butterflies," Adroit said. "Lady Flaxen said I could. I am not permitted to eat the butterflies, but I would not. I am a butterfly." Pepin laughed and said, "You are no butterfly. You are a frog." "Why do you think I am a frog?" "Because your eyes are so big and red and beautiful," Pepin replied. Adroit turned to the Queen and said, "You are someone of significance." "You could say that," Jezebel answered. "I am insignificant," Adroit stated. "But I am of importance to my mother and father." She peered at the Queen and then said, "You are the mother of my father. You are of importance to him and so you are of importance to me." Jezebel said, "Come here." Adroit did and then the Queen commanded her as she twirled her own finger in the air, "Now turn around." Jezebel looked over the Child of Shadow and peered at her green scaled skin with disgust, and then Jezebel asked, "What should I think of you?" "I am insignificant," Adroit replied, then she went over and took the Queen's hand, and said, "But you are of importance to me." Jezebel looked at the Child of Shadow's hand. She thought it would be wet or slimy. It was cold but there was also a warmth to it. "You should not hold my hand," Jezebel told her. "Why is that?" Adroit questioned her. "You said it yourself, you are insignificant." Adroit released her hand and took a step back and

questioned, "I am not of importance to you?" "Why would you be?" the Queen questioned. Adroit asked her, "I am not a butterfly to you?" Jezebel looked to the fluttering insects that nearly covered the garden, and then she answered, "You are far from a butterfly." "You are still of importance to me," Adroit stated before she turned and walked away. "Auntie, I think you hurt the giant frog's feelings," Pepin spoke. "Feelings?" Jezebel repeated. "Do you believe that creature has such a thing?" "Yes," Pepin replied. "It... The giant frog likes you a lot and if she likes you a lot, she has to have feelings." "Adroit!" Virago's hoarse voice could be heard in the distance. "Adroit!" She perked up at her name, and then she called out, "I am here!" "Adroit!" "I am here, mother!" Virago rushed in as the Morgog Sentinels with her helped force her way through the guards positioned at the gate. She saw her daughter and ran over to her, flinging her arms around her. Virago held her tight and then Virago started to cry. "Why do you weep?" Adroit questioned her. "I thought I had lost you," Virago replied. "Why did you leave Flaxen? You were supposed to stay with her." Queen Jezebel watched the interaction between the two with interest. "She said I could go play with the butterflies," Adroit answered. "Did I do something wrong?" Virago lifted her eyes and looked around the garden before she stated, "We were here yesterday. You can not walk off by yourself. If you wanted to leave the garden, you have to go with someone." "I am not to be alone," Adroit repeated. "Yes, you are too young to be alone." "But I have always been alone," Adroit told her. "I have been alone until you and father made me of importance to you." "Because you are of importance to me, I do not want you to be alone when you are so young," Virago told her. "Please, do not go off by yourself again." "I will do as you say," Adroit stated, and then she asked, "Do you still see me as a butterfly?" "You shall always be a butterfly to me," Virago told her. "No matter what you do... You shall always be a butterfly to me." "Adroit, come here," Jezebel bided her. She walked over to the Queen, and Jezebel questioned her, "Tell me again why you came to this garden." "I came to see the butterflies," Adroit replied as she pointed to them. "There are so many different kinds. My mother sees me as a butterfly." "How do you see yourself?" Jezebel questioned. Adroit glanced at Virago, then turned to the Queen, and answered, "I am insignificant." "Do you know what the others are saying about you? Those who also live at the castle." Virago moved up behind her daughter. "Does it matter what they say?" Adroit questioned. "They are not of importance to me." "I would have to say I agree with some of what they say," Jezebel stated. "You are a peculiar creature and one I fear might be here to hurt us." "You see the Shadow in me," Adroit spoke. "I thought it had gone when my mother first embraced me on the ship, but you see it. I don't want to be feared, and I don't want to hurt anyone else." "I forbid you from coming anywhere near my great-niece," Jezebel ordered her. "I also forbid you from coming to this garden again. I think it best both of you left." Virago took Adroit by the hand and without a word, she left with her daughter. Pepin spoke up after they left, "Auntie, why were you so mean? I have so few friends. I wanted to play with the giant frog." "You might not understand things just yet," Jezebel began. "I was cruel but I was also testing my daughter by law's resolve. She chose to take in that Child of Shadow. Virago must have been emotionally drained on the ship. I want to know if she took in that child on a whim or if she has the fortitude to go through with this path."

Outside of the East Garden...

Lady Flaxen came across Virago and her daughter, and she went and wrapped her arms around Adroit. "I am so glad that your mother found you," Flaxen spoke then peered up at her friend and said, "Please forgive me. I should have never taken my eyes off of her." "There is nothing to forgive," Virago told her. "Adroit now understands she cannot go off by herself." "Please, you still must forgive me," Flaxen pleaded. "I referred to your daughter as a puppy." "A puppy? Is that what you are holding in your arms?" Virago questioned. "It is," Flaxen replied. "The puppy is a gift from Edward's cousin to you." Adroit peered at the small ball of fur and asked, "Do we eat it?" "No," Virago answered. "It is a pet." "I am glad to hear," Adroit stated. "It is so small. I doubt I would have been satisfied to eat it." Virago took the puppy from Flaxen, knelt to Adroit, and said, "Do you know what a pet is?" "No." "A pet is something to keep you company," Virago stated as she placed the puppy in her arms. "A pet is something to play with but not to eat. See... He has already found you of importance to him." Adroit petted him and said, "He is soft. I think I might find him of importance."

* * *

King Malodor sent a reply back to Tabitha and the letter the Messenger Hawk carried gave her permission to have full access to the TowerRoth Citadel. The TowerRoth Citadel was as big as King Solom's Caldron. It was built as a fortress to defend against invaders but it was still beautiful to behold with its white stone walls and mammoth towers. The convoy reached the gate of the citadel on the second sun's cycle. Tabitha stood up and proclaimed who she was to the guard on watch and that she carried a letter from King Malodor. The Head of the guards met her at the gate and then he verified that the letter bore King Malodor's insignia. The guards let them in through the gate. Soldiers patrolled the outer wall, but the citadel itself was run and guarded by Roth warrior-monks. One of the Roth warrior-monks spoke up, "We received an urgent letter from our King, instructing us to meet all your request, Tabitha. I do not understand why it is so urgent for you to be granted access to the throne room. A King nor a Queen has ever sat upon the throne. It is no real throne room." Another Roth warrior-monk spoke, "It is the second time we have gone to the throne room this sun's cycle otherwise it has been closed up since the time it was finished." JuJu looked to the sky as he said, "We must hurry. The sun will set soon, and the moons have started to rise." "Ye said this was ye's second time going to the throne room," Fairah stated, and then she asked, "Why did ye go the first time?" "Your group is our second set of visitors," the Roth warrior-monk replied. "A group arrived less than a nal ago and also requested to see the throne room." "It must be Pluck," Zenba uttered. "She's here." The pace of the group increased as many were hopeful to find Pluck and one was desperate to find her not there to claim Tabitha's seat. They entered the throne room to find a cloaked figure with her back to them along with a Femor. "GuideMa," Gamemnon uttered. "Why did you bring the false Serviatrix here?" Zenba fluttered forward to utter her friend's name but Votar beat her to it. "Pluck!" he called out. "Pluck, is that you?" The cloaked figure perked up at the name but said nothing. "Do not worry," Votar spoke. "I am no longer angry with you." The sun set, and the Auror Array began to dance about in blue and green waves of light across the darkening sky. "The eve is moments away," Gamemnon whispered to Tabitha. "Go, claim what is yours." She took a few steps forward as two others that the group hadn't seen moved in and blocked her, and the cloaked figure turned to them. The female lowered her hood and revealed that she wasn't Pluck. The third Serviatrix had fiery long hair pulled back in a braid that loosely wrapped around her

neck three times. Her feline eyes were a very light blue and her fur was a light brown. An older Dreadgon was with the cloaked figure, and he spoke, "Sabrina, look, another Necrom with a tail. Could this be a False One?" "She must be," Sabrina declared. "Who are you?" Gamemnon demanded as he took a closer look at the Femor and saw that they wasn't GuideMa. "Why are you here?" "To claim what is mine," Sabrina replied as she sat on the throne. "After all, I am the true Serviatrix." The Auror Array changed its coloring as if angry, and red hues danced across the sky, lighting up the one on the throne.

Chapter Six

The One Who Sits On The Throne

Wellspring...

TowerRoth Citadel...

Sabrina sat upon the throne as if she was a conquering queen claiming the spoils of her victory. The red hue of the Auror Array lasted for several mites and then it returned to its blue and green hues. Gamemnon snarled as the seat was lost to this would-be Serviatrix. The older Dreadgon took up position to defend his Serviatrix as the Femor who wasn't GuideMa moved closer to Sabrina. There was also one who resembled a green humanoid toad with a cane and a long white beard. "Tad, have I sat long enough?" Sabrina questioned. "You have," the humanoid toad replied. His race was called Toadians. "Good, I hate sitting so stiffly," Sabrina said as she leaned in one corner of the throne and draped her bare feet on the opposite armrest. "Do we need to do anything else while we're here?" "No," he replied. She asked, "Where to now?" Tad answered, "There is a temple somewhere outside of the Valley of Blood or we could go to Sage Temple." Fairah recognized the Toadian and said, "JuJu, we are joined by another Immortal." JuJu sneered at Tad and said, "It would have to be him." "Fairah? JoJo? Is that you?" "My name is JuJu. Why after all these seasons can you still not remember that my name is JuJu?" "I guess it has always boiled down to a matter of importance," Tad replied as he flicked his long red tongue at him in a disrespectful manner, and then the Toadian moved over to Fairah, and asked, "When did you return to Wellspring?" "It has not been that long," she replied. "I see that you have brought with you your own Serviatrix." "I have," Tad replied, glanced at Tabitha, and stated, "I see you have your own." "She is not my Serviatrix. My Serviatrix is the true Serviatrix and her name is Pluck." Tad glanced at Tabitha and then inquired of JuJu, "Is she your Serviatrix?" "I have not decided," JuJu replied. "I shall wait and see what the signs dictate." Tabitha walked over to the raised throne and looked over the third Serviatrix, and then Tabitha said, "You look somewhat like me, but not as much as Pluck." "Why is this Pluck not here if she is a Serviatrix candidate?" Sabrina inquired. "The answer should be obvious," Tad replied. "She is not the true Serviatrix but a false one." Votar stepped forward and declared, "Pluck is the true Serviatrix." "And yet she is not here," Tad stated. "This Pluck you speak of has been decreed by the Great Creator to be one who would lead the people astray. She must be wicked and those who follow her are all fools." "I do not follow Pluck," Gamemnon declared. Tad peered at him,

and then he said, "Tabitha is also a false Serviatrix, and anyone who would follow after her is a fool." Gamemnon sneered at him as Votar also glared at the Toadian. Nirva sensed the growing tension in the room, and he spoke up, "Concerning which Serviatrix is the real Serviatrix, I believe we need to hold our anger and listen to one another. And I do not mean we need to boast about our candidate but have an open discussion about what qualifies our candidate to be the Serviatrix." Sabrina questioned, "Does that mean I have to sit through some boring conversation?" "We are too busy right now," Tad stated. "We have much ground to cover. The Shadow and/or Cursed could appear at any time." JuJu spoke up, "They already have in the Valley of Blood." "The Valley of Blood?" Tad inquired. Fairah stated, "It is the valley mentioned in the prophecy at Sage Temple. Did you not sense a disturbance there?" "I did sense some sort of great Maag-llee come from that region. Did the two of you call upon some great power?" "We did," JuJu replied. "What was done in the Valley of Blood is not important," Fairah stated. "What is important is that the Cursed are loosed and have joined with the Shadow. We must also join together and not let a disagreement separate us." "We need to band under Sabrina," Tad insisted. "We must raise an army and have Sabrina lead us." "I'm not too keen on leading anybody anywhere," Sabrina spoke. "I thought you said I would be rewarded and rewarded beyond my imagination if I took on this role." "I keep trying to explain it to ye," Tad said. "Ye shall be rewarded beyond the small scope of ye's mind." "All I care is that there be plenty of gold or something of equal value," she told him. "If we're not moving anytime soon, I think I'll take a nap here." "Lazy child. Stop thinking so much about ye's self," Tad scolded her. "Aren't you doing the same thing?" Sabrina argued. "Aren't you only thinking about your interest?" "I am thinking only of Wellspring," he replied. "What has Wellspring ever done for me?" she questioned. "What has anyone done for me?" A Roth warrior-monk entered and said, "Evening is here. Would any of you wish to stay and sup with us and perhaps even spend the night? We will gladly provide any hospitality you require." Nirva said, "I think we should take him up on his offer." Votar turned to the warrior-monk and said, "I and those with me accept your generous offer of food and bed." "We also accept," Gamemnon stated. Tad glanced at Sabrina, and she said, "I'm always up for free food." "Come with me," the Roth warrior-monk spoke. "I will show you to your rooms so you may freshen up and then we will eat once the meal has been prepared."

* * *

The sun's cycle before in the Fletching Kingdom...

Fletching Castle...

Edward's room...

Adroit woke as morning came and found that she was still in her mother's arms but her father was nowhere in sight. She could smell that he was near, so she slipped from her mother's embrace careful not to wake Virago and walked out to a balcony where her father stood looking out over the kingdom. "Something troubles you." Edward turned and smiled when he saw Adroit and said, "You are up." "You are thinking of someone who you only think of when you are alone." He turned and bent so that he was nearly eye level with his daughter, and he asked, "How do you know such things?" "I am not sure," Adroit replied. "I believe as more and more of the Shadow fades from my thoughts, things that I was never taught are surfacing. These things are

from my people but not the Shadow." She paused, and then she said, "The one who is on your mind, there was a magic that connected the two of you and it still lingers." "The Mystic Rose," Edward spoke. "I had it in my possession once and then she bonded with Pluck." "Pluck," Adroit repeated. "She's the one you think of only when you are alone. There's another who thinks of her only when she is alone." "Virago also thinks of Pluck?" "Mother does, but she thinks of Pluck when she is with you," Adroit answered. "I speak of another who thinks of Pluck when she's alone. She sees Pluck as a little girl and she also thinks of her but with a different name." "Are you talking about Lady Flaxen?" Edward questioned. "She knows Pluck only by Pluck." "No one else knows the Pluck that is a woman, but you did mention that she sees her as a little girl," he spoke, and then he questioned, "Do you speak of my mother? Does the Queen think of Pluck?" "She does, but when the Queen thinks of her her thoughts are full of regret and guilt." "Can you tell me the name the Queen calls Pluck?" "I can't," Adroit replied. "I pick up feelings and sensations. I can't listen in on minds," his daughter replied. "The connection you both hold to this Pluck is very important in what is to come. I think you should ask the Queen about her." "Return to Virago. I am going to go meet with my mother, and I want you to stay so that you do not worry yours."

Sometime later...

The throne room...

"Enter, my son," the Queen bided him. "What brings you to see me this early in the morning?" "Could you come walk with me in the gardens?" he questioned. "I would like to speak with you." "I can," Jezebel replied, then stepped down from her throne, and took the hand Edward offered her, and then they strolled hand in hand through the walkways connecting the gardens. After they had walked for nearly a half nal, Jezebel questioned, "What did you wish to speak with me about?" "Did you know that my daughter has a gift?" "What gift is this?" "She can sense the hearts of those around her," he replied. "And she told me that we have been thinking about the same person but only when we are alone." "I see." "Adroit also told me that you think of this person but you think of her under a different name. My daughter could not tell me the name. I thought about what she could mean and the only conclusion I have come up with is that you know Pluck's birth name. I was told no one knew her birth name and that I was only to refer to her as girl. Why would you still be thinking of a child who was here in the castle only about five seasons? The way you talked about her back then, I could swear that you did not like her. I believed you even hated her." "There was a reason I selected that particular girl to come to the castle," Jezebel replied. "Why is that?" "It was your father's last wish." "My father..." Edward uttered. "Why would he want Pluck to come to the castle?" Jezebel paused and looked out at the West Garden, then she turned to her son and answered, "Your father's heart may have never wavered from me, but parts of him did." "I see," Edward stated. "Do you?" Jezebel questioned. "Do you understand who Alba was to you?" "Alba was her name. I never knew," Edward spoke. "Alba or Pluck was my playmate, a child to learn and grow up with. Are you saying she was my father's?" "I am saying that she is your sister. Your father was very cruel to insist that I bring in the child who would be a constant reminder of what he did to our marriage. I did despise Alba, but my rage was focused on your father and Alba's mother. Both of them died so I only had Alba to focus on." Jezebel paused and then she said, "I heeded your father's last request, but I stripped

Alba of her name along with any rights she might have had in this family. I did something cruel... I made her less in your eyes. It was not until I heard what Alba had done for you that I regretted my actions. I have been thinking of her more since your return." "Pluck is my sister," Edward repeated as if the fact hadn't sunk in yet. "Would you have ever told me?" "I do not know. My heart would have determined what I did with her. I wanted to hate her and as my hatred for her lessened, I feared I might start to care for her, so I had planned to send her far away once you no longer needed a playmate." "I cannot grasp that Pluck is my sister, but that does mean that the love I have for her... I no longer have to be ashamed of my feelings or fear my love is torn in two. I love my sister, and I love my wife. I must go. I must tell Virago." Jezebel questioned, "You are not upset with me?" "I am, but I am more pleased to hear this news. I believe I can come to understand why you did it, but I do not know if my outrage will ever lessen. I can say that I do not hate you for it. I have also done terrible things to Pluck that can never be forgiven, but now I can embrace the feelings I have for her."

Several nals later...

West Garden...

At a table overlooking the flowers...

"You are very happy about something," Virago spoke as she glanced across the table at her husband. "I am, and I need to break a promise with you to tell you the reason why," Edward said. Virago wiped Adroit's mouth with a napkin, and then she said, "I remember only one promise you made to me. It concerns Pluck." "Do I have your permission to break my promise?" "Yes, tell me what has made you so happy." "I have found out that Pluck is my sister." "Your sister? I do not understand." "Let us just say that my father left the castle on occasion. Pluck is my half sister and now I can love her and I can love you." "I think I understand," Virago stated. "But if Pluck is your sister that makes her my sister by law." "It does," he replied. "I can show Pluck brotherly love and I can show you love that is due to a wife." Adroit asked, "What about me?" "I already love you as a daughter." Adroit asked, "I am of great importance to you?" "Yes, you are of great importance to me," he told his daughter, and then he told his wife, "I no longer have to hide my love for her from you. I can love Pluck as a sister." "I think I understand now. You have been worried about my feelings. I am jealous of her for having part of your heart, but maybe my jealousy will lessen knowing that she is your sister."

Later that evening...

Edward woke and found that Adroit was not in bed with him and his wife. He started to worry but then he saw his daughter on the balcony looking up at the two moons. "What are you doing?" he asked her as he approached her. "I sense someone," Adroit answered. "This person who you had only thought of when you were alone is having doubts about herself and her purpose in this existence. She needs someone to give her strength and to help her find her way again." "How can I help her?" Edward asked. "She is on Wellspring and I am here." "I believe I may know of a way. Take my hand, father and think of your sister." Edward took his daughter's hand and thought of Pluck and his room faded into the background and the dark boarding room of a tavern appeared. He saw Pluck sitting on one of two beds staring out the window at the moons. "Pluck,"

he called out to her. She turned and saw what looked like ghostly images, and she uttered, "Edward, is that you?" "It is," he told her. "I have come here for there is something I must tell you." Pluck noticed the child's hand he held, and she asked, "Who is this with you?" Edward peered down at Adroit and then he looked to Pluck and said, "This is your niece." "My niece, how can this be? I have no family, so how can I have a..?" "Adroit is my daughter," Edward told her. "And so Adroit is your niece." "Your daughter and my niece," Pluck uttered as she walked over to them and then knelt to the child. She reached out her hand to Adroit and it passed right through the child, and Pluck questioned, "Are you two dead?" "No, we are..." "Our hearts are merely traveling," Adroit explained. "Our bodies are not here." Pluck straightened as she said, "I still don't understand. Adroit is not of Man." "I adopted her," Edward explained. "Virago fell in love with this child so we adopted her." "But how would she be my niece?" "Because you are my sister," Edward told her. "You are my sister Pluck, and I am your brother. I just learned of this from my mother." Pluck reached out to take his hand but she also passed through his form, and then she said, "I have a family. Is Jezebel my mother?" "No, we share the same father. King Stark is your father." Pluck took a few steps back and collapsed on the bed that was not hers and disturbed the Femor sleeping there as she uttered, "I'm a Daughter of a King?" "You are," Edward said. "Adroit told me that you needed to hear some encouragement from me. Tell me, what is bothering you so that I can give you some words of encouragement." "You already have," Pluck told him. "You already have. You can tell me how everyone fairs and more about your daughter. You said her name is Adroit. What race is she? I've never come across her kind before." "I'm a Child of Shadow," she spoke up. "You were a Child of Shadow," Edward corrected. "You are now my daughter and a person of significance and a person of importance to me." Pluck stated, "I have heard these words used before and wasn't sure of their meaning. Adroit was a Child of Shadow." She moved off the bed and knelt before the child, "Are you why I have been able to see my beloved prince, my beloved brother again?" "It is," Adroit replied. "You are of importance to him and because of that, you are of importance to me." Pluck lifted her hand as if to touch the young child's face, and the Mystic Rose heard her heart's wish and used her Maag-Ilee to allow Pluck to touch those who had come to see her. The Mystic Rose lifted from her back and lit up the room in a bright yellow glow. GuideMa shielded her eyes as she sat up in bed. Adroit smiled when she touched her cheek. "May I hug you?" Pluck asked the child. Adroit nodded, and Pluck wrapped her arms around the child. "You and I are alike," Pluck whispered to her. "We have been touched by the Shadow, but we have those who love us who we must fight for." Pluck pulled back and looked into Adroit's large red eyes and said, "Virago must love you very much." "My mother does," Adroit replied. "You have many who love you and one who has yet to find his love for you," the child spoke as she motioned to the gold choker around Pluck's neck. "You speak of Malus." "You are one of the ones the Shadows are after," Adroit stated. "Be very careful. Their lies are woven in truths. It is hard to see the truth when it is buried in the lies." "I will be careful, and thank you for bringing my brother here," Pluck said as she straightened and then turned her attention to Edward and spoke, "I've missed you." "And I you," he replied. "We were attacked by the Shadows on the Isle of Kismet and lost a few along the way back to Fletching, but Virago and Lady Flaxen are well. I've been crowned Emperor." Pluck remembered her place and bowed before him as she started, "My Emperor, I..." "Please, rise. You are my sister." "You are still an Emperor, my Emperor," Pluck told him. "So let me pay my respect and honor to you." "I shall if you shall allow me to pay proper respect to my sister. Rise, High Guard and Princess

of Fletching." She stood and Edward hugged her as she said, "I don't know if I can get used to the title of Princess so if you don't mind, let's just leave it at Pluck." "Your name," Edward spoke and then he said, "I know the name that was taken from you. I know your real name. Your mother named you Alba. Your real name is Alba." Pluck didn't know what to say so she held onto Edward tighter as so many questions bombarded her mind. "Alba," Pluck finally spoke. "Malus said it was a rare rose." "It is also who you are," Edward told her. "You finally know who you are." "Father," Adroit spoke up. "I can no longer hold us here." "I must say my goodbyes then," he said. "I have a way to contact you. You are not alone." His and Adroit's image started to fade. "Thank you," Pluck told him. "Thank you for telling me all of these things. I no longer feel conflicted inside. I believe I know what I must do." Their images faded, and the Mystic Rose returned to Pluck's back.

The Fletching Castle...

"Are you happy, father?" Adroit questioned a little tired. "I am very happy. I was able to see my sister, and I believe I gave her the words she needed to encourage her. Are you hurt in any way?" "No, I'm only tired," Adroit replied. "Why could I not touch my sister until the Mystic Rose lent us its power?" Adroit replied, "The magic I used, is powered by your heart. If your love for her had been as strong as the love you feel for my mother, you could have touched her with only my magic." "Thank you, my daughter. A great weight has been lifted from my mind. I can now focus on taking on the responsibilities of Emperor. Come, I should return you to your mother's arms. It is time we went to bed."

Wellspring...

WoodsMirer...

"The Man," GuideMa began as she turned and sat at the end of her bed. "He was the Man who ruled the ones who shipwrecked here?" "Edward," Pluck spoke. "His name's Edward and yes. He is the Emperor of the Five Kingdoms and my brother. Brother... What a wondrous sound it has?" She turned to the Femor and questioned her, "How much of our conversation did you hear?" "Enough to know that he claims you're a Daughter of a King." "Then once we return, Duke Gamemnon will know." "Were you trying to hide this revelation?" GuideMa questioned. "For my own safety, I think it would have been wise of me to keep it a secret a little longer. It only gives Gamemnon another reason to kill me." Pluck went over to her own bed and sat, and then she asked, "What is your opinion of the Shadows' prophecy that was spoken to us?" "It clearly stated for there to be only one Serviatrix, two must die." "It did, didn't it?" Pluck questioned, and then she stated, "I'm going to TowerRoth Citadel as soon as the sun rises. I have something I must see tomorrow evening." She questioned, "What will you do?" "I am to witness your end, so I need to stay by your side," GuideMa replied as she laid down. "I need to sleep right now." "Sleep... I'm so tired but I don't know if I can sleep." "It's easy," GuideMa told her. "Just close your eyes and your mouth, the weariness of the body will do the rest."

Chapter Seven

The Final Arrival

The Shadows' camp...

The dark of night paraded over those who sided with the Cursed. Abhora and Mar entered Malus tent and saw that the Shadow Necrom held something tenderly in his hands, and then she inquired of him, "Where is the False One?" "She has left with the Witness," Malus replied. "How is that possible? Did you release her from the life debt?" "I did not," Malus replied. "I just gave her a little piece of myself." "Why would you do a thing like that?" she inquired. "Because I could, because she will always be mine," he answered, and then he asked as he lifted the white and red Alba roses, "Did you see what she left me?" "What do I care about flowers? You better know what you're doing with this False One." "Do not worry," Malus replied. Mar questioned, "Why did the False One leave you flowers? Does she find you of importance?" "I told her to give me that which was insignificant to her. She believes by leaving these behind for me I'll believe that the one who gave her the white rose and the one who gave her the red is of no importance to her, but I know the truth." Malus carefully twisted the stems together as he spoke, "I intend to find the one who gave her this white rose and kill him. No one will have her. She is mine and soon I'll know where the one I must destroy is."

* * *

The next sun's cycle...

The sun's cycle that Auror and Array were farthest apart...

Outskirts of the TowerRoth Citadel...

The sun neared the horizon as another sun's cycle came towards its end as Pluck and GuideMa hurried toward their destination on their beasts. GuideMa rode the Giant Lunar Flytrap and Pluck had purchased a beast named a LieSorr that resembled a reptilian-like horse with claws instead of hooves and a sharp beak for a nose. Pluck pulled on the reins of the LieSorr as she looked around the barren canyon they traveled through and then shouted to the Femor in front of her, "Are you sure this is the way? We passed a large rock that rises above the canyon. I could climb up on it and view the land." GuideMa halted her Giant Lunar Flytrap, turned to her, and inquired, "Did you just ask an Aviatrix if she's going the correct way?" "Yes, I did. We just seem to be moving away from the TowerRoth Citadel and not towards it," Pluck replied, thought about it, and then asked, "Was there something wrong with such a question?" "Yes, you have insulted me immensely." "I didn't mean to insult you," Pluck spoke. "I only meant...." She paused as she felt an ache in her chest that had grown from a pang of worry to a bundle of anxiety, and she admitted, "I only want to return to those I care about. Let's see what we need to see at the TowerRoth Citadel and then return to those we love." "You wish to return to Votar, but what of your mistress? You belong to Tabitha." Pluck looked to the brand on her right hand and then spoke, "Maybe she will be kind enough to let me go see everyone so that I know that they're safe." "I'm not sure about kindness. Tabitha seems a lot like my Duke." "You don't see

Gamemnon as kind?" Pluck questioned. "I don't see Gamemnon as kind, but he's not my Duke. I would have thought you see some good qualities in him." GuideMa replied, "I see him as he is. He wants to save Wellspring, and I'll assist him in his endeavor." "Lead on then, oh great Aviatrix. I'll go where you go. We both need to see what we were meant to see and then return and find our loved ones safe." She turned back on her saddle and started to nudge the LieSorr and then GuideMa shouted over her shoulder, "Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to view the land before we continue on. I haven't been here before." Pluck turned her reptile-horse, galloped back to the tall slender rock, and climbed to the very top. She looked in the direction they had been traveling in and motioned with her hand as she stated, "I don't see the citadel or any building in that direction." "What about the other direction?" GuideMa asked. "I need to climb higher to see in the other direction," Pluck replied as she started climbing again. She climbed to the other side of the oddly shaped tall slender rock, found a flat area to stand upon, and looked in the direction they had come from. "I think I see it or at least I think I see it. I don't know what the TowerRoth Citadel looks like." GuideMa rode her Giant Lunar Flytrap around the rock and then about twenty hands away from where Pluck was. She rode until her plant-beast came to a raised area on the canyon path, and GuideMa spoke, "I can't see it from here. Do you see a path or road that goes over to it?" "I do. There's a large tree about ten mites back that has a path that goes to the citadel." "It will be dark soon," GuideMa stated. "I don't mind traveling in the dark," Pluck said. "I see quite well. I can take us the rest of the way in if you will trust me... or I should say.... If you want to take a gamble on me." GuideMa turned on her saddle to peer back up at Pluck as the sun set, and she replied, "I guess I'll have to take a gamble on you. I must report to my Duke all that I have witnessed and he will especially want to know..." Pluck looked down at the Femor as she spoke, and then GuideMa got this peculiar look on her face and abruptly stopped speaking to her. GuideMa's eyes widened as if she saw something frightfully wondrous, and then she placed a hand to her mouth as if to cover a surprised gasp. The Femor looked like she was about to cry and it made Pluck a little afraid to see the otherwise strong GuideMa about to weep. The fur on the back of her neck rose and Pluck felt like she would cry herself. "What is it? What do you see?" Pluck questioned, then turned, and stared at the horizon behind her. A hue of red filled the sky and danced about it as if it were blood-flames dancing to unheard music. Pluck had never seen something so beautiful before and felt the wonder GuideMa must have experienced. She placed her hand on the hard rough surface of the tall slender rock as her tail twitched with awe. The red hue faded and was replaced by dancing lights of blue and green. The sight went on, but Pluck knew they didn't have time to view any more of it, so she climbed down and mounted the LieSorr and rode the reptile-horse till its head was beside the plant-beast's head. "It was beautiful, wasn't it?" Pluck asked as she turned in her saddle to view the lights once more. "I've never seen such a thing. Do you know what it was?" GuideMa turned to her as if she would still cry and didn't answer her only continued to stare at her as if seeing something she had never seen before. "What's wrong? Say something. You're starting to frighten me. Please, what is it?" Pluck pleaded and then motioned to the distant sky with her hand but kept her eyes on the Femor as she asked, "Does what we saw have some sort of meaning?" GuideMa had no words to explain what she saw or what her heart finally realized. She couldn't explain it to herself so how could she explain it to the Woman? GuideMa thought of her Duke and all that she owed to him and convinced herself she only had to get them to the citadel. GuideMa finally replied, "It is called the Auror Array, and it occurs nearly every night in this region, and in itself, it has no meaning.

It's only beautiful as you said." "Don't scare me like that. I thought something horrible had happened," Pluck spoke, patted the side of her reptile-horse, and asked, "Ready?" GuideMa nodded and then said, "I am. Lead on." Pluck nudged her LieSorr and the reptile-horse trotted back the way they had come. GuideMa watched her trot off, then she looked once more up to the sky, and then muttered to herself, "I did see something horrible, something that rattled me to my very core. I must immediately tell my Duke. He surely will understand what I witnessed and explain it to me," she continued to mutter as she placed a hand to her chest. "Explain what my own heart can't understand."

Chapter Eight

Those That Would-Be

Nearly all who were present in the throne room came and gathered with the Roth warrior-monks for an evening meal within the dining hall. What was usually a noisy meal among the warrior-monks as they spoke of their time that sun's cycle or told of news they heard from home, was received in silence as the three visiting groups were wary of the other two. King Solom felt tired from all his traveling so he retired to his room and had his food sent there. Tad turned to Nirva across the table from him and said, "Ye spoke of wanting to access who is the rightful Serviatrix, so why do we not do that now?" "Can you do so without arguing?" Nirva inquired. "I can, but can all of you?" Tad questioned. "I believe we can," Votar replied. "Let us compare our Serviatrixes. We can all see that our candidate has a tail and hair like a Fire Lion. I know that Pluck and Tabitha fall within a Necrom not born a Necrom, but what about Sabrina?" "Do you want to tell them?" Tad inquired. "Not particularly," Sabrina replied. "I want to continue filling my mouth with this delicious free food." Tad shook his head, irritated at her, and then he stated, "Sabrina was born in a faraway land that is not part of the Necrom Kingdom. She was raised by a Femor couple and..." Zung spoke up, "Her story sounds very similar to Tabitha's." "What about the one known as Pluck?" Tab questioned. "What is her story?"

Outside of the dining hall...

A Roth warrior-monk escorted GuideMa and Pluck to the others and was about to go into the great room when Pluck stopped him. "Wait. I'm not ready yet," she said. "Not ready for what?" GuideMa inquired. "I'm not ready to face those I hurt," Pluck stated. "I did a cruel thing to them. I left without saying goodbye. Zenba, Zung, Quip, and Staunch must be very upset with me." "I noticed you never mentioned Duke Votar." "I don't think upset or mad describes what his feelings must be towards me. I was cruelest to him most of all. I told him I would be his wife." GuideMa questioned, "Are you saying you lied to him about your feelings back then?" "No, I only... I told him something that can't be." The warrior-monk told them, "I will leave you here. I have other things I must attend to. Enter the dining hall when you are ready. I have already shown you the room you can stay in for the night." "I don't think I'll be sharing a room with this Woman again," GuideMa told him. "Woman?" he repeated. "I heard one of the Serviatrixes wasn't an actual Necrom. I did not know she was of Man. As for the other thing, stay in the room or not stay in

the room. That is your choice." He bowed to them, turned, and left. Pluck watched him leave and then she turned to the door leading into the dining hall and stared at it. "I for one am not going to wait anymore," GuideMa told her. "My Duke expects me the moment I return." The door to the dining hall opened before GuideMa could open it and a different Roth warrior-monk came out. GuideMa and Pluck stepped back so he could exit, and he left the door open for them, and they heard the conversations from within. GuideMa decided to listen in instead of going right in.

Inside the dining hall...

Gamemnon said to Tad, "I guess Sabrina could claim the right to a Necrom not born a Necrom with that story, but what about a Scarred Rose. Tabitha bears the mark of a Scarred Rose. Does Sabrina?" "Show them?" Tad ordered his candidate. She stood and pulled down her shirt to show everyone a tattoo of a purple rose with five claw marks through it next to her collarbone. "That's what you claim that is," Gamemnon spoke as he laughed. "It's supposed to be a Scarred Rose, not a clawed rose. What sort of thing is that anyway?" "You don't know what this is?" Sabrina questioned. "This is the mark of my clan. This is the mark of Thiof. Never heard of my clan? I didn't think you did. My lands are so far away. Thiof is..." "Sabrina!" Tad snapped at her to silence her. "I think you have spoken enough. What is important is that she has the mark. What of Tabitha?" Gamemnon nodded to her and Tabitha stood and showed Sabrina's group the rose birthmark on her left palm. "What is that tiny thing?" Tab questioned as if mocking her. "It looks like a blob. You claim that tiny mark is the proof." Fairah spoke up, "Do you believe size matters in this contest?" "Not necessarily, but Sabrina's tattoo clearly is a rose, not some child's depiction of a rose," Tad spoke, and then he questioned, "What of this other would-be Serviatrix? Does she have any such mark? If she does, we must see it."

Outside the dining hall...

GuideMa turned to Pluck and noticed a frightened look on her face. She had seen part of the Woman's rose through her torn shirt, and while the Mystic Rose rested on her back, there were a few scars upon it. GuideMa never saw the entire rose as it lay on the Woman's back or the extent of the Woman's scars. Pluck noticed her stare, felt herself flush, and turned her gaze to the floor. The Mystic Rose was no longer visible since Pluck acquired a new shirt in WoodsMirer to replace the torn one. She whispered to the Woman, "You should go in and show them your rose." Pluck lifted her head and asked, "If you had these scars on your back, would you want others gawking at them?" "I never saw you as self-conscious," GuideMa replied. "I thought you would be..." "Be what?" Pluck inquired when the Femor didn't finish. "I thought you would be..." GuideMa started to answer, then remembered her interaction with her over the last sun's cycles, and said, "Never mind. The person I thought you were, may not be the person you are." GuideMa thought about it some more, and then she answered, "If I had such scars, it would depend on how I got them. Are they marks of honor as from a battle or..?" "They are marks of shame," Pluck replied. "They are marks caused by others' hatred of me." "I guess not then," GuideMa replied. "Let us listen a little further."

Inside the dining hall...

When Tad asked the question of Pluck's rose mark, those who knew of Pluck's beating by the order of Commander Avarice fell silent. Tad thought their silence meant something else. "This other would-be Serviatrix has no mark. I would think that would eliminate her right away, but what is most important is that Sabrina sat on the Throne of Kroth." The Head warrior-monk perked up at the mention, and he inquired, "The Throne of Kroth? Is that why all of you wanted to see the throne room?" "It is," Tad replied. "You should know that the..." the Roth warrior-monk began. GuideMa walked in and spoke, "Duke Gamemnon, I have returned!" She turned to Votar and added, "I and the vile Woman." Pluck hadn't moved from her spot outside the door, and she felt her face flush once more as she muttered, "I wanted to wait just a few mites." "Where is Pluck?" both Votar and Tabitha yelled with excitement. Pluck took a deep breath and then entered the dining hall where everyone turned and looked at her. She felt her face flush a deeper red and wondered if everyone could see the color through her beige fur. Votar stood from his seat and ran over to her, but Tabitha ran faster and was the first to greet Pluck. He stood back frustrated in his lack of speed as Tabitha took both of Pluck's hands into hers. "You have returned to me," Tabitha declared with glee. "I said I would," Pluck told her. "Are you hurt?" Tabitha inquired as she lifted her hands and looked Pluck over. "I see no injuries. You are wearing a dreadful ragged looking cloak. We will have to do something about that, but later. First I have to know... Did you vanquish my enemies for me?" "No," Pluck replied. "I was met with an overwhelming force and didn't engage them." Gamemnon questioned her, "Did you run away from battle after gloating how you would face the enemy and defeat them?" "I said I would face the enemy to try and buy the encampment time to escape, and I did just that." Tad looked over the new Serviatrix and questioned, "How did you accomplish such a feat? No one but the Serviatrix can defeat the Shadow and Cursed." The older Dreadgon with Sabrina said, "This one claims to not have fought the Shadow and yet prevailed." "She did," Tad spoke with suspicion, and then he asked, "What sort of deal did you strike with the Shadow?" "One that is none of your business," Pluck replied. "I don't even know who you are. Why should I answer any of your questions?" Tabitha said, "Don't listen to the old frog. He claims to have the true Serviatrix with him." Pluck looked to the other who had a similar appearance as Tabitha and herself and that Necrom looked more interested in shoving food and wine into her face than what was going on around her. Pluck glanced at GuideMa before she uttered, "A third Serviatrix? There are three Serviatrixes?" "There is only one Serviatrix," Tad declared. "Which are you, and what sort of traitor are you to even consider a deal with the Shadow?" Pluck peered around the room at faces she knew and those she had never seen as everyone waited on her answer, and then she replied, "I'm the False One." "What did you say?" Tad spoke surprised by her answer. "You admit to being a false Serviatrix. Well... There you have it. Now I only have to convince all of you that Sabrina, not Tabitha is the true Serviatrix." "I don't care about that right now," Tabitha said. "I have my servir back. Come, Alba. I have eaten enough. Let us go to my room." Tad thought about her comment and then he said, "Did my old ears hear right? Is the would-be Serviatrix who calls herself the False One a servir to another Serviatrix?" "What of it?" Gamemnon questioned. "Does that not mean that Pluck is not the true Serviatrix?" "Alba," Tabitha corrected him. "Her name is Alba." Pluck thought of her conversation with Edward, and she said, "My name is Alba." "Come, Alba," Tabitha said as she took her by the hand as if they were children and Tabitha wanted Pluck to go play with her. "We have much to talk about." "Pluck," Votar spoke as Tabitha dragged her out of the room. She glanced back at him, not wanting to face him just yet and went with her

mistress. Gamemnon sighed, then looked to GuideMa, and said, "It would seem that our time to compare Serviatrices is over for now. I too have to speak with someone." He motioned for GuideMa to follow him out, and she did as he also left the dining hall. Votar stood where he had been abandoned till his sister came up and spoke with him, "You must be patient and grateful." "Grateful for what? How can I be grateful that Pluck was stolen from me once again?" "You should be grateful that she returned and seemingly unharmed, but that dark cloak she wore... It seemed to follow her around more than she was wearing it." Fairah approached them and said, "I am not sure about the unharmed part, but I believe ye did notice something. I sense an essence of Maag-neg about her. Ye mentioned the cloak, but did ye notice the gold choker she wore?" "Are you saying the Shadow could have done something to her?" Kabal questioned. "I am saying just that," Fairah replied. "One does not meet the Shadow and leave unchanged." "Nirva," Votar spoke. "Yes, my Duke." "In about a nal, go and speak with Gamemnon on my behalf. I wish to talk with Pluck. There's much I must discuss with her." "I will do as you say, my Duke, and while I wait, I think I will continue to talk with our hosts," Nirva replied, motioning to the warrior-monks at the table. Kabal questioned her brother, "What will you do till then?" "Only what I can," Votar replied. "I'll anxiously await Pluck's arrival." "What if Tabitha doesn't give her consent for you to see her servir?" Kabal asked. "I'll also be considering a solution to that problem," he replied. "I believe storming her room and whisking Pluck away can be a contingency plan." Sabrina finished eating and drinking, then stood, and the male Femor, older Dreadgon, and the others with her also stood and went out with her as she started for her room. "All this talking has made me tired," she told the Toadian. "I'm going to turn in early." "Whatever ye do, do not make me have to go and find ye in the morning," Tad told her as he turned his attention to Fairah and JuJu. "I believe I am the one who should be telling you that," Sabrina told him, then leaned down to him, and whispered, "Or do you believe I haven't taken notice how you've been eyeing the creature with the white eyes and hair?" "I do not know what ye mean," he claimed. "Fairah is just someone I knew a long time ago." "If you say so," Sabrina spoke, and then she asked, "What sort of creature is she?" "Fairah? She is of Man," Tad replied. "Man, so that is what they look like. They don't look that scary." Tad told her, "Man may not be that scary, but Fairah, she can frighten the green out of my skin."

Tabitha's room within the TowerRoth Citadel...

She still had a hold of Pluck's hand as she dragged her into the first room that had a fireplace and four chairs situated in front of it. Tabitha released her hand and said, "You have to tell me everything that happened to you." She sat on one of the chairs and asked, "How did you prevent the Shadow from attacking the encampment? What is that dark cloak that you're wearing? It almost seems like it's alive, and what about the gold choker you're wearing?" Pluck didn't want to answer her so she asked her own questions, "Who were the frog creature and the female Necrom with him?" "His name is Tad and he's a Toadian. I believe Fairah said he was also an Immortal. The female Necrom like us is Sabrina. She seems very brash and unrefined to me." Pluck said, "Tad said true when he accused me of making a deal with the Shadow. I gave them something to allow all those in the encampment to flee." "What did you give the Shadow?" "My life," Pluck replied. "I thought the Shadow would simply kill me, but instead..." Pluck placed a hand to the Gold Choker of Fettering as she said, "The Shadow bound my life to them. I was basically a prisoner to them and could not go far from the Shadow without this choker"

sucking the life out of me. The dark cloak I'm wearing allows me to be away from the Shadow, but I'm not free of them." "No!" Tabitha shouted as she stood. "You are my servir. They can't have you." "I'm sorry, mistress," Pluck spoke as she knelt to one knee, and then she said, "I'm still your servir. I took the oath, but my life belongs to another. I didn't understand what I was giving up back then, but if I was given the choice again, I would still give my life to save those in the encampment from slaughter." "You're a horrible servir," Tabitha yelled at her. "You're supposed to put me first. You're supposed to put me above all things." "I'm sorry," Pluck repeated. "I am a horrible servir." "You must be punished," Tabitha told her. "You must be punished severely." Pluck said nothing. Tabitha's voice softened as she said, "I should punish you, but I also should have been the one who went out and faced the Shadow but instead I fled. You told me you would delay the Shadow and you also told me you would return to me. Can I fault you for the means by which you had to embrace to accomplish both promises?" Pluck again said nothing. "Alba, I don't ever want you to leave my side again." "I don't think I can promise you that," Pluck spoke as she once again touched the choker. "My life will be claimed again. I just don't know when." "I won't let the Shadow have you," Tabitha declared. "You're my servir." "I can promise to serve you for as long as I can," Pluck stated. "Look, you're making me cry," Tabitha told her. "You are a horrible servir."

Elsewhere...

GuideMa followed Gamemnon as he took to a walkway that went around the outside of the citadel. They walked for nearly half a nal, and then he paused and looked over the land under the glow of the two moons. "Why is Pluck still alive?" he questioned. "I heard that she was captured by the Shadow or did she do something foolish like hand herself over?" "She traded her life for those in the encampment," GuideMa answered. "Her life that was required was actually her living life. Malus, the Shadow Necrom she made a deal with struck her with some sort of weapon that placed a spell upon her. Pluck's life is now bound to his and she is only able to leave his side by wearing the dark cloak." "I thought her choice in apparel was unusual. Now I understand its purpose," Gamemnon said, and then he asked, "Did you stay with her while she was a prisoner?" "I did and learned much from the Shadow. They believe she's someone called the False One, and a prophecy of theirs proclaims she could help them win this war." "The Shadow have their own prophecies about the Serviatrix?" "Yes, and they hinted that there are more prophecies," GuideMa told him. "We need to discover what those prophecies are?" Gamemnon spoke. "If I am to serve you, if I am to bring about your wish, I need to know," GuideMa began, and then she asked, "Do you wish to place Tabitha as the Serviatrix even if she is not the true Serviatrix?" "You question me as if you have learned something else," Gamemnon spoke, and then he asked, "What else have you learned?" "The Shadow prophecy speaks, 'For one Serviatrix to rise, two must fall, and with the fall comes victory.' There can only be one Serviatrix." "So, in the end, there will be only one?" he spoke, and then he stated, "I plan to make sure it is Tabitha." "Even if another is the true Serviatrix?" "Yes, Tabitha is the one who will save Wellspring," Gamemnon stated. "You should know that Malus will probably come after Pluck. I don't believe he let her leave with no other purpose than to make her happy." "The Shadow Necrom has some sort of interest in Pluck?" Gamemnon questioned. "He does have a strong interest in her," she replied. "I believe the information you have gathered can be put to good use." She inquired, "How did all of you come

to be at the Tower Roth Citadel?" "We went to the Mountain Temple of Iyllonia," Gamemnon replied and then he told her of the prophecy there, and once he finished, he asked, "Do you have anything else to tell me?" GuideMa considered the trip to the citadel through the canyon, and then she answered, "No, there was nothing else of importance. I can go into greater detail about the other Shadow we encountered." "That won't be necessary right now. You should go rest. You look tired." "I am very tired," she admitted. "I'll go and do as you say." She left and went to the room the Roth warrior-monk had given her and Pluck, but Pluck wasn't there. Gamemnon stayed behind as he contemplated all that he had learned about Pluck and the third Serviatrix. He was there sometime before Nirva approached him. "Votar wishes to see the Woman and he has sent you to make the request," Gamemnon spoke. "He has," Nirva replied. "Before I tell you whether or not I'll pass on his request to Tabitha, tell me, Nirva, what do you think of Sabrina?" "She is nothing like Tabitha or Pluck." "I can see that with my own eyes. What do you think her motives are?" "I believe she said it herself. Sabrina is in it for the reward she believes she'll receive." "I don't know if that is her only reason," Gamemnon stated. "Sabrina seemed very disinterested in just about everything, but she seemed almost too disinterested." Nirva questioned, "You believe she is putting on some sort of act? What reason would she have for that?" "What reason indeed?" Gamemnon repeated. He looked once more to the lands below the citadel, and then he said, "Tell my old friend he may see Pluck." He laughed as he stated, "I will send his once fiancée to his room. It may take me a day or two to convince Tabitha, but I will convince her."

Chapter Nine

We Immortals Three

Earlier in the dining hall while Nirva was still there...

Tad stood to join Sabrina and the others of his group when Fairah and JuJu approached him. "Do ye have a moment so that we can speak with ye?" she questioned him. "For ye, I have an eternity of moments," Tad replied, and JuJu grumbled as he shook his head. Tad questioned, "What did ye want to speak with me about?" Fairah said, "Let the three of us walk. We have much to catch up on." The three of them left the dining hall and walked the inner part of the citadel. Fairah and Tad walked side by side and JuJu walked behind them like an abandoned cub, brooding more and more with each step. "Have ye seen any of the other Immortals?" Fairah questioned. "There is nearly an Immortal for each of the races, but JuJu is the only one I have come across. I thought they would start to gather after the Cursed were released." "Some of the Immortals went with Man like ye's self when Man fled Wellspring," Tad told her. "After the Immortals failed to prevent the Great War, many fell into despair and regret, and they isolated themselves from the world." "Do ye know where we might find some?" she questioned. "Surely ye know where a few are." "I knew JuJu was in the area, but he also became a hermit and only came into the civilized world when summoned by a king or duke," Tad replied. "I know of no other's location." Fairah said, "I would like the three of us to focus on finding the others. I believe we shall need all of the Immortals' power to face the combined forces of the Cursed and Shadow." "I cannot leave

Sabrina," Tad stated. "I made a vow to her to stay by her side till this whole Serviatrix thing is over." JuJu's cupped ears perked forward, and then he said, "No need for the Toadian to help us. The two of us alone can journey across Wellspring and find the other Immortals." Tad turned his head and glared at him, so JuJu added, "We can walk side by side through any peril, and we shall have each other to keep warm through the cold nights." Fairah spoke, "We have Maag-Ilee to help keep us warm." Neither of the males listened to her as they continued their own conversation. Tad stated, "I should also go to help keep her warm." "How could someone who's cold and slimy keep the beautiful Fairah warm?" JuJu questioned him. "She needs someone with fur and a warm embrace." "Ye may have fur," Tad started in. "But ye smell as if you have not had a bath since the Great War." JuJu smelled his own arm and was taken aback by his own scent. Fairah upped and stopped as they continued their bickering. "Ye may be right that I need a bath, but no amount of bathing shall cure your slime-covered skin," JuJu told him. "Most females find my glistening green skin of comfort," Tad told him. Fairah had forgotten how much they bickered in the past, and she put a hand to her head as if to fight off a headache and spoke, "Please, I need all of ye's help." Tad took Fairah by the hand and told her, "I am all ye's, body, soul, and mind. Ye can have any part of me." JuJu folded his arms and grumbled, "Ye do know I am still here? I am far from losing this fight. I shall be holding the fair Fairah's hand by tonight." Fairah snapped at them, "The fight we should only be worrying about is the coming one with the Cursed and Shadow." They continued to ignore her. "Lilies... They are her favorite," Tad spoke softly, and then he noticed one of the Roth warrior-monks in the distance and yelled to him, "Ye there. Do any sort of lilies grow in this area?" "There are wild Glow Lilies on the hill beyond the citadel," the warrior-monk replied. Tad glanced at JuJu and said, "Since ye have declared war, I shall hold nothing back. See if ye can match my wooing skills." "Ye there," JuJu yelled after the same warrior-monk. The Roth had already started to leave and turned back to them. "I need a place to bathe." The warrior-monk said, "I can have a basin of water brought to your room." "I need to submerge my entire body," JuJu told him. "There is a hot spring nearby. Go to the east side gate and follow the path." JuJu turned to Tad and said, "Go gather your flowers. They shall not help ye here." "We shall see about that." Tad turned and at a quick pace, walked in the direction the warrior-monk had indicated for the lilies as JuJu turned in the opposite direction and ran for the hot spring. "Are either of ye listening to me?" Fairah called after them, and then shook her head as she stated, "They never change."

Later that evening...

Tabitha's room...

Pluck continued to kneel before Tabitha as Tabitha continued brooding. Pluck was tired from her ordeal with the Shadow and from riding all sun's cycle to reach the citadel. She nodded off but then woke herself. Tabitha noticed and angrily stood from her chair and commanded, "Alba, rise." Pluck stood to her feet, feeling the sting of kneeling too long. "Go into my room and sleep. An exhausted servir is no good to me." "I don't need to take your bed. The warrior-monks here gave me and GuideMa our own room." "You are not to leave my side unless I command you," Tabitha told her. "Now... Go to my bed and sleep." Pluck bowed to her and then gladly went and lay on her bed. Tabitha returned to her chair and stared at the flames of the fire. Gamemnon entered sometime later. "Is Pluck here?" he questioned. "She is asleep," Tabitha replied. "Do not

wake her." "Votar has requested to see her." "She is mine," Tabitha spoke. "He knows that and that is why he requested permission," Gamemnon told her. "Pluck or I should say Alba is yours to do with as you please. Tell him no. Tell him he can never see her again." "Alba does not need to see him tonight. I'll think about it and then let you know tomorrow if I'll allow it," she told him. "No need to inform Votar," Gamemnon spoke. "Let him stay up all night waiting on her. My old friend has lost his head, so I think we should give him time to ponder things." He went and sat in a chair, and then he said, "What I would like to talk to you about is Sabrina." "The other like Alba and myself. Why do you wish to speak about her?" "GuideMa has informed me that there is a prophecy among the Shadows that relays that if the Serviatrix is to rise, two must fall." Tabitha turned and looked toward her room as she said, "Two? You are also talking about Alba. I won't hurt my servir. She's mine." "Pluck has already fallen. She is your servir after all. Is there any other position that is lower than a servir?" he questioned her. "I only wish to focus on Sabrina. This newcomer has become a new obstacle for us. We should consider what we should do with her." "Sabrina has strong warriors surrounding her, including an Immortal," Tabitha stated. "Alba has Fairah and maybe even JuJu. I have no such power on my side." "Who says you have to have an Immortal to triumph?" "It wouldn't hurt to have at least one." Gamemnon spoke, "You have two important things. You have me and you have your father on your side and that means you nearly have the entire Necrom Kingdom behind you and you have the entire Roth Kingdom behind you. Can either of the other two boast so?" "No," she replied, then walked over, and embraced him as she said, "You and my father are a great help, and I don't mean to complain, but it doesn't hurt to have an Immortal on my side." "I can't deny that you're correct," he told her as he stroked her fiery hair. "But we still need to make plans without the help of one."

In the bedroom...

Pluck had no problems falling asleep. She was nearly in the dream world before her head hit the pillow. The dark cloak wrapped itself tightly around her as if embracing her. The cloak was no longer pitch-black in color; it had lightened a bit to charcoal gray. It had taken care of Pluck the whole journey since leaving Malus, keeping the cold and wet at bay. The dark cloak was, in fact, a Sceld and so it had a will and mind of its own. The Sceld found that it liked Pluck, not because Malus did, but there was something about Pluck that brought back pleasant distant memories. It kept her weary body from overexerting herself by lending its own energy to her, and it wished it could do more for her as she slept in an exhausted and worried sleep. Across Wellspring in the Shadows camp, Malus held his unsheathed dagger as he sat on his bed crossed-legged. He stretched out his senses to the Gold Choker of Fettering and connected to Pluck's sleeping mind. Malus had difficulty before connecting to her waking mind, but it was very simple to slip into her's while she slept on. "Pluck," he called out. "Pluck, come to me." In her dream, she saw Malus standing a distance from her in a dark void. "Where are we?" Pluck asked. "The where is your mind within your dreams," he replied. "This is a dream. Are you really here or am I..?" "Your life is bound to me," Malus explained. "I'm able to speak with you like this because of that bond." "I don't think I like this sort of communication. It feels..." "Feels what?" he questioned when she didn't finish. "It feels like you have taken a knife and forced your way into my skull," Pluck replied. "Pain is part of Shadow life." "Does this have to be painful?" she asked. "I would be able to pay more attention to what you are saying if I wasn't so focused on this throbbing ache." "I

never thought about such a method other than force. You'll have to bear with the pain this time," he answered her. "Tell me, have you returned to your friends." "I have and they are all well." "The Shadows always keep their word. We might be many things but we are not oath breakers." "Why have you come to speak with me in this manner?" "I..." Malus started. "I find that I miss your presence. I find that I want you once again by my side. I believe I also miss the presence of that persistent Witness." "I'll have to tell GuideMa that." "I believe I do not want you to do so," he told her. "Your mind seems troubled. Have you met with the one who gave you the white Alba." "No... I haven't had the chance. He... I... I'm bound by another responsibility which has prevented me from speaking with him." "What responsibility might that be?" Malus questioned. "I don't wish to speak about that right now. Do you mind if we talk about something else?" In the Shadow camp, Malus unfolded his legs and lay back on his bed and rested his head on his pillow. "We can speak of other things," he told her. "Tell me, is the other Serviatrix there?" "Tabitha is here." "Did you find the sign I hinted at that would be found at the citadel?" "No," Pluck replied. "We arrived at the citadel after dark and nearly went right to bed." Malus was silent for a while, and then he asked, "Have you thought of me while we've been apart?" Pluck put a hand to the choker and replied, "How can I not think of you? There's a constant reminder around my neck." Malus heard hostility in her voice which had been masked before, but now it had been unleashed. "Your mind is exhausted. Has the pain caused by this linking of minds been lessened?" "It has," Pluck replied. "It's nearly gone. Were you able to find a way to communicate that doesn't involve force?" "I merely lay back on my bed and thought of the importance you are to me," Malus replied. "The grip I had on your mind lessened but our connection remained strong; it might have even become stronger." "Why did you want my life?" Pluck questioned him. "Desire," he replied. "Shadows put desire nearly above all else." Malus rolled on his side and envisioned Pluck beside him, and he smoothed his hand over the empty space as he spoke, "Desire made me covet you. Now you are of significance to me and you are of much importance to me." "I talked with one who speaks like you," Pluck told him. "I think I understand a little more of what you're trying to tell me." "What of you?" he asked. "What am I to you?" She placed a hand back to the gold choker and answered, "You're the one who has imprisoned me. You're the one who tricked me." Pluck felt the dark cloak next to her fur and added, "You're also the one who has also kept me safe." "Which am I more of to you? Safeguard or prison guard?" "Prison guard," she replied. "I'm bound to you, but our bond is based on a one-sided desire. I can never be what you want me to be. I'll always be just something you own." He confessed, "You're becoming more to me than that. You're something I must have, but I want you to also have the same desires toward me as I have of you. I want to become one with you as we are nearly one talking in this dream plane. Is there one who is of more significance to you?" "You know there is. I thought I could fool you by giving you the white rose that he gave me, but I believe you see too much into me. My heart belongs to him." "Heart," Malus repeated. "He owns this small part of you. I own nearly your entire body." "Body, no," she told him. "All you own is my life. All you own is the ability to let me live or take my life. You own no more than that." "You make it sound like there is a third who owns some part of you." Pluck didn't want to bring Tabitha into this so she remained quiet. "I want to own more than just your life," he told her. "I also want your body, and I might even want this heart you have given away." "The heart is something that can never be owned," she told him. "It can only be given." "Your ways, those that aren't of Shadows, are peculiar to me," he admitted. "Life outside of the Shadow is

confusing, but something I would like to learn more of." "I'm tired," she spoke. "I would like to sleep." "Your life is mine, so we can talk like this anytime you are asleep. Rest for now. I'll come for you when I know I can secure your life with me." Pluck said nothing as she thought about the existence ahead of her. She needed to talk to Votar before Malus came for her. Maybe she could convince her mistress to allow her to leave her side for a nal.

* * *

Fairah ended up walking alone on her way back to her room. Tad and JuJu had gone off on their separate ways, and she couldn't believe what fools they were. "Fairah," a voice called out. She turned and saw an older Egle standing there with grand feathers of silver and white. "SoarOn, is that ye?" she questioned. "It is," he replied. "It has been so very long since I have laid my eyes upon ye." "I was wondering if any of the other Immortals would present themselves. I am very glad to see that ye have appeared," Fairah spoke, and then she questioned, "Where have ye been all of this time?" He told her, "I have traveled from one end of Wellspring to another. There is nearly no place I have not been. And what of you... How was ye's time away from us?" "Long," she answered. "Long and lonely for the most part, but there were many seasons where I took care of one who is like, who is a daughter to me. Those seasons flew by." "Children, a luxury us Immortals have not been blessed with." SoarOn glanced around, and then he inquired, "Are ye here alone or are there other Immortals here?" "JuJu and Tad are here. I have not seen any other Immortal since arriving back in Wellspring," she replied and then asked, "What about ye? Have you seen an Immortals?"

Elsewhere...

Tad and JuJu met each other nearly head-on as they returned from their preparations of wooing the delightful Fairah. It was as when they were younger. Tad held a bouquet of Glowing Lilies and JuJu's panda-marked fur nearly gleamed in the firelight. He had called upon a wind to thoroughly dry himself and had a few animal friends to comb through his fur. The two Immortals glared at one another and then raced towards Fairah's room. They rounded a corner and saw SoarOn speaking with her, and they both ducked back around the corner hiding from this third rival. They listened in as he and Fairah continued their conversation. "Ye have not heard then," SoarOn questioned. "Heard what?" she asked. "Someone has been hunting the Immortals and trapping them." "What do you mean by trapping them?" "As ye know, we cannot be killed so the only way to stop an Immortal is to trap them. Many of the Immortals have disappeared, and I fear many of them may be trapped." "The Cursed," Fairah spoke. "It must be the Cursed. They know that our numbers were why we were able to seal them away. They must be hunting us down to prevent us from resealing them." "I suggest that the four of us stay together and that we look for those Immortals who have not been trapped," SoarOn spoke. "The news is so horrible," Fairah stated, and then she asked, "Why did you come to the TowerRoth Citadel?" "The prophecy at the Mountain Temple of Iyllonia spoke of the Throne of Kroth," he answered. "I heard that the Auror Array of this night would provide another sign, but I arrived much too late to see the sign. Where ye here? Did a Serviatrix appear and claim the sign." "There are three Serviatrixes here right now, and two were present in the throne room when the prophesied Auror Array occurred. The one known as Sabrina was upon the throne when it occurred." "Sabrina, what do you think of her as a Serviatrix?" SoarOn inquired. Fairah

replied, "I actually do not know that much about her." "What of the second Serviatrix who was in the throne room?" "Her name is Tabitha. Duke Gamemnon is supporting her," Fairah replied. "She fits many of the signs given of the Serviatrix." He asked, "Do you support Tabitha?" "No, I support the third one known as Pluck." "You support her even though she was not present in this throne room?" "I do," Fairah replied. "She is the one I spoke of that is a daughter to me." "I understand," SoarOn said. "Ye have been looking with ye's heart. I would like to meet this Pluck." "Are you staying in the citadel tonight?" she asked. "I am," he replied. "Would you like to walk with me? I saw a field of Glowing Lilies on my way in here. They should be all aglow by now."

Down the hallway at the corner...

Tad griped in a whisper, "He stole my idea. I had the idea about the lilies." "You had the idea to bring the lilies to Fairah," JuJu told him. "He had the idea to bring Fairah to the lilies." Fairah told SoarOn, "I would really like to walk with you." SoarOn held out his elbow for her, and Fairah wrapped her arm around his, and then they started to head out of the citadel. Tad and JuJu followed them out and soon the Toadian and Necrom were dashing from one tree to another as they made their way to the hill outside of the citadel through a small woods. JuJu and Tad hid behind a tree of their own as SoarOn and Fairah continued on to the treeless hillside. Glowing Lilies covered the hill and set it all aglow. Fairah knelt to one as she put a hand to it pale white petals, "They are so lovely." "No more lovely than you," SoarOn told her. "I remember how ye hated when someone picked a flower, so I thought it more fitting to bring ye out here." Tad looked at the bouquet of lilies he held and the flowers nearly limped over in despair. JuJu snickered but then he immediately quieted himself. Fairah straightened as the two moon's glow set her and her Sceld a glistened so that she appeared to be an apparition once more. SoarOn drew close to her and moved the back of his clawed fingers down her cheek. She clasped his hand and SoarOn bent down to her and rubbed his beak against the other cheek in the Egle's way of kissing and Fairah placed her other hand to the side of his head. "It has been so long," she told him. "I have missed ye so much." "And I, ye," he told her. "Nearly a sun's cycle has not gone by that I have not thought of ye." They embraced one another, and Tad and JuJu glanced at one another and then headed back in silence and in defeat towards the citadel. SoarOn and Fairah stayed out a few nals more as they walked hand in hand under the moonlight.

Chapter Ten

A Storm Of Serviatrixes

The sun rose lighting up the citadel and all that surrounded it in the glow of morning. GuideMa had taken the Giant Lunar Flytrap and rode him out to the canyon where she and Pluck had witnessed the red Auror Array, and the Femor dismounted and stared at the tall slender rock as the sun broke over the horizon and cast its light over her shoulders. Once again tears came to her insect eyes, and she quickly wiped them away. She stayed there until the sun's body completely rose over the horizon and then she mounted her plant-beast once again and returned to the citadel before she was missed. Nirva noticed her return but no one else seemed to notice

she had left before the twilight of the new sun's cycle. Votar had nodded off in the chair in his room, awaiting Pluck's visit. Kabal let him sleep as she went to join the warrior-monks in their morning meal. The Roth warrior-monks ate in shifts, and Kabal joined the first one along with Nirva, Gamemnon, JuJu, Tad, and Sabrina and her four companions. Kabal was past scowling at the Duke of Torlawn so she merely ignored him. The meal went by in silence.

Tabitha's room...

Pluck blinked open her eyes, feeling somewhat more rested but knew it would take sun's cycles before she felt like she had gotten enough rest. Tabitha was sitting in a chair next to her and spoke, "I believe the role of mistress and servir has been mixed up in this relationship of ours." She watched as Pluck's emerald green eyes widened, and then her servir quickly got out of bed on the other side, rushed over and bowed before her, and as Tabitha watched Alba kneel before her, a sense she couldn't explain made her uncomfortable. "Please, forgive me," Pluck spoke. "I did not mean to sleep in your bed through the night." "One sleepless night won't hurt me," Tabitha told her. "I've had plenty of time to rest. You on the other paw seemed to have had little. I want you to tell me about your time with the Shadow. I feel as if you're keeping something from me." "I am keeping something from you," Pluck admitted. "I'm not ready to talk about it just yet. Please, allow me to keep it to myself a little longer." Tabitha eyed her and then without answering her, she said, "You spoke his name in your sleep." "Whose name?" Pluck questioned, fearful she may have called out Malus name and would have to explain who he was to her mistress, and Pluck didn't want to have to tell her just yet that she was Tabitha's servir but her life belonged not to the Shadow as a collective but to one male Shadow Necrom. "Do I even have to say it?" Tabitha questioned. "Votar... He has requested to meet with you." Pluck was relieved it was him she had uttered aloud, but what did that mean? She didn't remember calling out his name in any dream. Maybe it was just whispers from her heart and that thought made her smile. "Don't grin. I don't like that Votar wishes to speak with you. I don't believe Votar understands that he can't marry you. A servir can't be a Duchess." "You're right," Pluck said, thinking more of that Malus owned her life than she was a servir to Tabitha. "I can't marry him. I do need to talk to him. I need to tell him... I need to tell him that I lied to him when I accepted his proposal. Mistress, will you allow me to meet with the Duke of Shangra?" "I never imagined how quickly you've taken up your new mantel as my servir. I thought you would be a very unruly servir." "A servir's not that different from a High Guard serving her Prince. I'm more restrained in what I can do, but it's no different in responsibility and respect." "Respect..? You respect me?" Tabitha questioned her. "I do," Pluck replied. "You may have Gamemnon behind you, but I believe you have a good heart. You only have to use it." "Use a good heart," Tabitha repeated. "Interesting concept. I'll allow you to see the Duke of Shangra. Take as much time as you need for this will most likely be the last you'll see of him." Pluck's heart sunk as her mistress spoke those words. She never allowed herself to think of it, but she knew she would have to leave Votar and most likely forever. "Thank you. Where should I look for you when I'm done speaking to him?" "Come here and wait for me here." "Yes, mistress." Tabitha again felt unsettled as Pluck knelt before her, and so she said, "Alba, call me Tabitha. I think I would prefer that you call me Tabitha." "Yes, Tabitha," Pluck spoke. The unsettling feelings Tabitha experienced eased a bit as Pluck referred to her as so. The feelings were still there, so Tabitha gave one more command, "I also don't want you to bow before me like this again, not unless I command it of you." "Yes,

Tabitha," Pluck spoke as she rose to her bare feet. The last of the unsettling feelings left Tabitha as both she and Pluck stood equally before one another. "Before you go, I must know something," Tabitha stated as she motioned to Pluck's left forearm. "Is that what I think it is?" Pluck noticed Tabitha's sword that leaned against her chair, and then Pluck answered, "It is the Lux. How long have you known that it's not the sword you possess?" "It took a while," Tabitha admitted. "But it was my own sword that whispered the truth to me. I didn't draw the Lux. I could never draw the Lux."

Pluck smiled and told her, "No, you drew the sword that is like a Blue Fire Diamond." She quoted a portion of the prophecy the Giant Lunar Flytrap had spoken, "They shall both claim the title and both claim doubt, but only one can have the sword that blazes like a blue fire diamond." Pluck told her, "You were always meant to draw the sword you did." Tabitha asked, "Do you believe I'm the Serviatrix?" "I do," Pluck told her wholeheartedly. "And I will ensure your safety." Pluck took a few steps back, bowed again, and then headed in search of Votar.

Elsewhere...

Sabrina and the four with her left the dining hall and went in search of some fun now that her belly was full again. She found the training room where the Roth warrior-monks honed their skills and she watched as those with her took turns sparring. The male Femor moved over to her and sat beside her. "Sister," he began. "How much longer will you follow that Toadian? I see no profit in what we're doing." "You might not see profit, but I see much much more," Sabrina told him. "Our clan has been in hiding long enough. I believe it is about time that Wellspring knew of our existence."

Elsewhere...

Votar's room...

His head slumped to the side, causing him to nearly fall out of his chair, and Votar woke with a start. Pluck was sitting quietly across from him in her own chair. She smiled when he looked at her and all the worry, anxiety, and frustration he had felt melted away. "Why didn't you wake me?" he asked. "I thought you needed the rest. Kabal told me you were here and that you stayed up all night waiting on me to come," Pluck replied, and then she added, "Your friend Gamemnon can be cruel." "My friend is becoming many things, and I believe cruel is the least of them," he spoke, then stood, and winced from the pain of sleeping in a stiff chair. "Come," Pluck said. "Come and sit on the couch." Votar did as she told him, and Pluck joined him on the couch. "Turn and face away from me," she ordered. He wasn't sure why but he did as she said. Pluck placed her hands on his back, and he jumped at the unexpected touch, and she commanded, "Be still." She again put her hands to his back and moved her fingers over sore muscles as she explained, "Commander Han was always overdoing it in his High Guard duties. Fairah taught me this technique to use on sore muscles and Han was uneasy as you, maybe as ticklish, but it will help so be still and endure it." Votar nodded and Pluck continued her finger work up and down his back. "You do know that I lied to you," Pluck stated as she jumped right into the conversation that needed to be spoken. "I never intended to wed you." "Kabal has told me as much, but you are here now. You're free of the Shadow and you can still be my wife." "I'm not free," she told

him. "I'm Tabitha's servir. I belong to her." Pluck thought of Malus and added, "I'm in no way free." He argued as he turned around, "A servir may still marry." "Be still," Pluck snapped. "Now turn back around." After he did so, she said, "I can't become a Duchess." "I'll buy you from Tabitha. I'll give her anything she wants for you." "She won't sell me," Pluck told him. "I don't think she'll sell me for anything." Votar turned to her once more and seized both of her precious hands and stated, "I'll make her. Somehow I'll make her." Pluck felt the presence of the gold choker around her neck as if it was reminding her of something she couldn't forget, and Pluck said, "You must understand that you can't have me. It wouldn't have worked anyway. Many Necroms would not have accepted me as your Duchess and you need to unify your people, not cause a rift." "I won't let you go," he insisted. "I love you. I have loved you since we met. I have loved you since I discovered your true lineage. I loved you and hated you at the same time back then, but I know without a doubt now... I love you more than anything." "What about your hatred of Man?" "When I heard Gamemnon had taken you from the encampment in the Valley of Blood. I was worried. When Gamemnon returned without you, I became frantic and that's when I realized my true feelings for you. I don't care that you're of Man, I don't care that your blood's red, I love you, Pluck. I love you. Tell me. What are your feelings towards me? Tell me you love me and nothing will stop me from wedding you. If I have to, I will advocate my dukedom to Kabal and..." She quickly reached up and placed her fingers on his lips to silence him. Pluck didn't want to hear anymore, she couldn't hear anymore or his love for her would change her mind, and she wouldn't be able to go through with what she must tell him. Pluck wouldn't inform him of Malus, but she would convince Votar somehow that they could never be together. "You can't. You must remain as the Duke of Shangra. King Solom and Tabitha will need your support and guidance as the Shadow and Cursed approach. There's not that much time. I fear a great battle is ahead for those on Wellspring." She thought of Edward and added, "And perhaps for those beyond its shores." He took her hands again and said, "I won't let you go." "You have to. We were never meant to be together. We were..." A knock at Votar's door interrupted her, and he called out, "Who is it?" "GuideMa. I was told Pluck is here. I must speak with her. I wouldn't have disturbed you, but it's very important that I speak with her now." Pluck had looked to the door, and then she turned to Votar and told him, "It must be very important if she has actually come to speak with me. I'll go talk with her, but I promise, I will come back and finish our conversation." She stood to leave, but he still held onto one of her hands. "I won't let you go," Votar told her. "There's nothing that can make me let go of you." Pluck said, "You're not going to make this easy." "I'm not," he replied. "I'm going to make it impossible for you." "Please, release me. I will be back." He let go and said, "Don't be gone too long." Pluck nodded, then went out the door, and met with GuideMa. "Let's talk elsewhere," GuideMa told her. "I want to speak to you somewhere private." Pluck said, "Lead on." They walked for a few mites, and then Pluck said, "You looked tired. Didn't you get any rest." "A little, but I went for a ride before the sun rose." "Why would you do a thing like that?" Pluck questioned. "You need to rest." "I had to go someplace. I had to see something again for myself." "Does this something again have anything to do with why you want to speak with me?" GuideMa replied, "It does." "Are we going to that someplace now?" "No, I am taking you to the throne room." "Why would you do that?" Pluck asked. "Because most likely there will be no one there right now," GuideMa told her, and then she eyed her a couple of times and asked, "Don't you wish to know if this is some sort of trap or if I intend to kill you once we are alone?" "If you intended to kill me yourself, you would have

done so the many times we were alone. If you intend to lead me into a trap, you should have done so before returning to the citadel." Pluck admitted, "I just have no idea what you would want to show me." They walked for a few mites, and then they entered the throne room, and Pluck looked all around and said, "What did you want me to see?" GuideMa didn't answer her but asked her own question, "What do you see?" "A throne. There's nothing else here." "Are you two here for the same reason I am?" a male questioned them. They turned to see that Nirva had come into the throne room. GuideMa told him, "You will have to tell me why you're here before I can answer that." "Last night before you two came in, the rest of us were supping with the Roth warrior-monks and one of them mentioned the Throne of Kroth. You two then came in and interrupted what he was going to say. After nearly everyone else had left the dining hall, I spoke with this warrior-monk and he told me the Throne of Kroth doesn't refer to the throne room. It refers to something else." Pluck asked as GuideMa remained unusually quiet, "What does it refer to and why are we talking about thrones and standing in a throne room?" "Long ago the TowerRoth Citadel was not located here but elsewhere. The warrior-monks here tell me some of the old citadel remains and the remains look like a canyon. In the old citadel in its glory days, a statue of the first king of the Roth was erected and it stood within the entrance of the old citadel. The statue was of King Kroth sitting on his throne. One mysterious night, King Kroth disappeared from the statue and left only the throne and the next sun's cycle, the TowerRoth Citadel was destroyed. Seasons later, the citadel was rebuilt but at this current location." "I still don't understand," Pluck spoke, and then she asked, "Why are you telling me this story?" GuideMa finally spoke up and said, "The remains of the statue is called the Throne of Kroth." "I still don't understand what that has to do with anything." "My guess is," Nirva spoke up. "If Tabitha and Sabrina were both in this throne room when the red Auror Array occurred, there is a good chance you were at the Throne of Kroth." "I was nowhere near a statue," Pluck spoke. "But I do believe we traveled through the ruins of the old citadel." GuideMa questioned her, "What else did you do while we traveled through the ruins?" "Nothing. We stayed on our beasts and... No, I guess I did dismount and climb that tall slender rock." "It wasn't a rock," GuideMa told her. "The side that faced us when you first climb upon it looked like a rock, but on the other side... On the other side, you stood on a throne to look for the citadel and you did so as the red Auror Array gleamed across the sky." "Fine, I stood atop the Throne of Kroth when the sky turned red," Pluck stated. "I still don't understand what any of you are trying to imply." "You don't know the prophecy," Nirva spoke. "I had forgotten you were not with us." Pluck demanded, "Someone please tell me what your both referring to." GuideMa told her, "One comes by sea, the other from a rival kingdom, and the third from among outcast. The Serviatrix shall appear and the claim of false Serviatrixes shall multiply. The face of the Serviatrix shall take her spot immediately. The arm of the Serviatrix shall grasp for gold. The heart of the Serviatrix shall act first. The three shall finally meet but not all at once. As cords of a rope, the Serviatrix is strong. Bind their hands, and the true Serviatrix's strength shall increase. The one who is atop of the Throne of Kroth when the dancing lights of green and blue begin and become as Man's blood this one shall lead them. Look for the sign when Auror the Greater and Array the Lesser are furthest apart." GuideMa paused, and then she said, "You were atop of the throne at that time." "I wasn't," Pluck said. "I couldn't have been," she added as she sat on the only chair in the room. "But that would mean..." Terror struck her whole body as she spoke, "But that would mean that I'm... that I could possibly be... But I gave my life to the Shadow. The Shadow own me... The Shadow will be coming for

me... Malus will..." "Are you sitting on my throne?" Sabrina questioned as she and her four companions entered the room. Pluck had diverted her gaze to the floor as she contemplated all that had transpired, so she lifted her eyes and questioned, "Your throne?" "Yes, my throne," Sabrina repeated. "I claimed it last night and the right to be the Serviatrix. You must be Pluck. The other would-be who foolishly gave up her freedom and became a servitor to the other would-be." She walked right up to Pluck and said, "Remove yourself from my seat." Pluck stood, stepped to the side, and Sabrina plopped herself down on the throne. "Tad says I'm top now so you have to listen to what I say." Pluck looked to GuideMa, then to Nirva, and then turned her attention back to Sabrina and asked, "And what do you say?" "I don't know," Sabrina said, and then she commanded, "Rub my feet or something." "Alba will be doing no such thing!" Tabitha snapped as she and her Roth bodyguard entered. Pluck moved closer to GuideMa and whispered, "I thought you said no one would probably be here." GuideMa questioned her, "Why would anyone want to come here?" "Good, all the would-bes are here?" Sabrina said. "What should I have the two of you do for me?" Tabitha yelled at her, "I'll be doing nothing for you except for toppling you off of your high and mighty seat." "Who? You and that Roth with you? I don't think so," Sabrina told her. "Anyway, I sat on the throne during the occurrence, and so I claim the right to be in charge." Gamemnon and then Tad entered. Gamemnon inquired, "Are you challenging Tabitha to a duel?" Sabrina stood as the four with her gathered around her, and then Sabrina questioned, "And what if the answer is yes?"

Elsewhere...

Votar's room...

The Duke of Shangra had gone over to a wash basin and splashed water on his face and stared at his reflection in the water. He heard sounds coming from the other room, so he grabbed a towel and dried his face as he rushed into the room. "Pluck?" he called. She wasn't there, but Votar noticed that something was standing on the balcony and whatever the large creature was, it had two sets of wings. He felt a presence behind him, and Votar quickly turned to see a male Necrom with black hair and gold fur. "You can't be he," the male Necrom spoke. "You can't be he who she gave her heart to." "She..?" Votar repeated. "Do you speak of Pluck? Are you one of the Shadow who captured her?" "I am one of the Shadow, but more importantly..." Malus replied, and then he professed, "I am the one who she offered her life to. I am the one who owns her life, and I'm here to claim what is mine." "Who are you?" Votar demanded. "She has not told you?" Malus questioned. "You still haven't told me if she is Pluck," Votar yelled at him, and then he inquired, "Do you mean Pluck?" "Yes, I mean her. Has she not told you?" Votar noticed the Shadow Necrom carried a red and white rose twisted together, and he recognized the white rose as the one he gave Pluck, and Votar inquired, "Told me what?" Malus declared, "Pluck belongs to me. Her life is mine. She belongs to me and only to me. She says that she gave you her heart. I've come to claim her heart so that I can have all of her." Malus drew his dagger and said, "I just have to eliminate you and her heart will be mine."

The End

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